



ISRAEL 2022 PHOTO JOURNAL

May 27 – June 7, 2022

Timothy Agee

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Day 1 - Travel (May 27, 2022)

Today, our whole family begins our long-awaited trip to Israel. I love visiting this country and am looking forward to sharing this journey with Olivia, Kate, and Sara. This time, I'm one of the co-leaders of the group, along with Bruce Zupa, who has been to Israel six previous times. With us are 24 other pilgrims, many of whom are making their first trip to the Holy Lands.



A few of us met at the Bellevue Church of Christ parking lot at 2pm on Friday to travel together to the airport. Just like my last trip to Israel, this one started off with air-travel issues. Our initial flight to Miami was delayed by over two hours and we only had a 1.5-hour layover before our flight to Tel Aviv. After waiting almost 2 hours trying to find alternate arrangements, American Airlines could find no other options, so they agreed to hold the flight to Tel Aviv until we arrived in Miami. The local manager said this is the first time he's ever seen them agree to hold a flight for a group.



After all of us made it through security at BNA, American Airlines then told us that the final call on whether the flight to Tel Aviv would wait for us was up to the captain of the flight, so we were at their mercy.



Our flight to Miami took off just before 8pm, and when we landed, we found out that they didn't wait for us. American put us up in a hotel and rebooked us out of JFK the next evening.



So far, this is beginning very much like my last trip to Israel. A little frustrating, but we're all safe, and I'm with my family. That's all that matters. Will post another update tomorrow.

Day 2 - Travel (May 28, 2022)

Our group left the hotel in Miami around noon for the airport. We were able to work with American to split the group and get earlier flights so that our connection in JFK would not be as tight as originally rescheduled last night.



Our family was placed on the second of two flights to JFK. We had a delicious Cuban meal while we waited for our 6:45pm flight.



Not to disrupt our trend, this flight was also delayed, but by only about 15 minutes. About 20 minutes after we got off the flight from Miami, we were finally on board the flight to Tel Aviv as the day came to a close.



It's been crazy, but we should only lose one day in Israel and have already been working on a modified itinerary to ensure it will still be a great trip.

Day 3 – Travel, Tel Aviv, Tiberius (May 29, 2022)

Most of today was spent in the air. Our 10-hour flight left JFK just after 11pm last night, and we arrived in Tel Aviv at 5pm today. The flight was relatively uneventful, and I was even able to get a little sleep (Don't think my flight buddy, Sara, got much sleep at all).



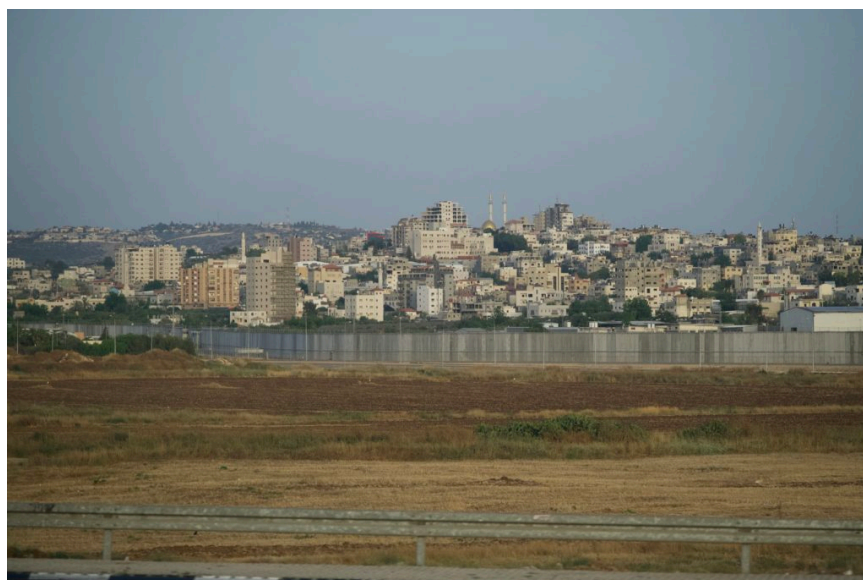
At Ben Gurion airport, we went through passport control, and four members of our group were selected to go to border control.



We got our luggage while we waited for them and spotted the first feral cat of our trip playing around in luggage storage. Israel is full of cats, but I never expected to see one at the airport. After the rest of the group joined us, we went through customs, met up with our guide Ami, and then loaded onto the bus.



Ami was one of our guides on my trip to Israel two years ago, and I'm looking forward to touring with him again. He introduced us to our bus driver Jamil, and then, after a prayer, we were off to Tiberius, which is about 1.5 hours away.



Along the way, he explained to us that we would be following in the steps of Christ, kings, and prophets. He talked a little about the huge variety of the geography in Israel even though it is smaller than most US states. From the bus, we could see a number of villages, and he pointed out that some were Arab Muslim, some were Jewish, and others were Arab Christian.



Kate and Sara's lack of sleep over the last two days caught up with them on the bus ride, and they were quickly out for the count. I thought this picture was super sweet and got their permission to include it.



Ami said that even though we missed a day, we would follow our itinerary tomorrow as planned, which will include a boat ride on the Sea of Galilee. He also explained that we would work in the most important sites that we missed like Caesarea Maritima, Tel Megiddo, and Mt. Carmel on later days.



On the way to Tiberius, we caught our first glimpses of the Jezreel Valley just after sundown. This was the setting for a couple of significant battles in the book of Judges. I'll write much more about this in the coming days as we tour around the area, but it was good to see it again.

We arrived at the hotel in Tiberius just after 8pm. Tiberius is a large, modern city on the Sea of Galilee, but it was originally built by Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great. Antipas is notable for being the one who beheaded John the Baptist (Mt 14, Mk 6, Lk 3), and before whom Jesus appeared in Luke 23.



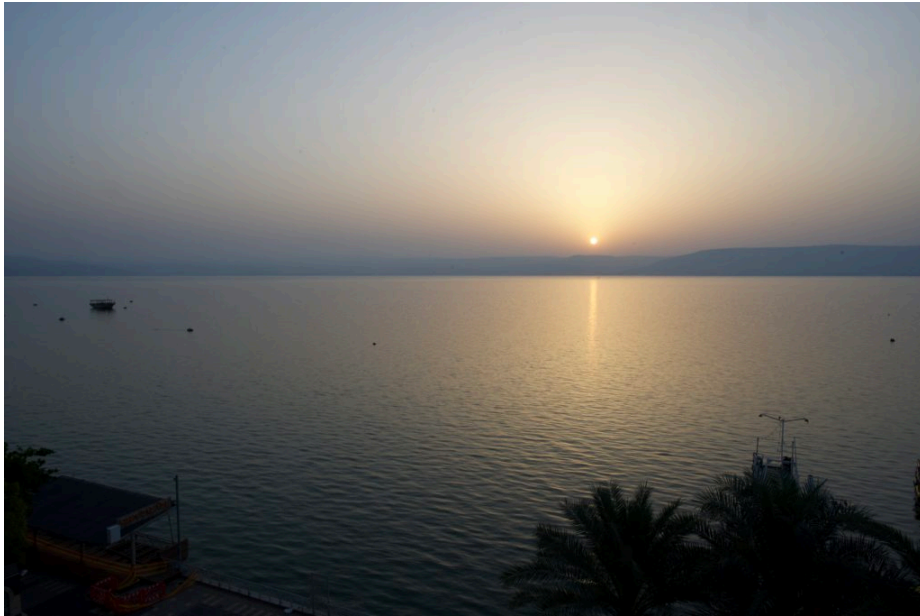
The hotel is right on the Sea of Galilee, so we should be able to see sunrise over the lake each of the next three mornings. We dropped our bags off at the room and then headed straight to dinner, which was a delicious buffet.



Our group met at 9:30pm for worship and communion before going back to our rooms for the night. Mike Johns talked to us about all the powerful things God has done through scripture, but that the most significant of these was raising Jesus from the dead. This is what saves us.

After three days of anxiety and stress during our travel delays, it all melted away once we arrived in Israel. It is so good to be back and experiencing the Holy Lands again, this time with my family.

Day 4 - Zippori, Arbel, Sea of Galilee, Capernaum, Mt of Beatitudes, Magdala (May 30, 2022)



This day was packed, and it was awesome! I woke up just after 3:30am and couldn't go back to sleep, so I eventually just decided to get up and watch the sunrise over the Sea of Galilee. I setup my tripod on the balcony to take some long exposure shots of the sunrise while drinking an excellent cup of coffee.



Once Sara woke up, we quickly got ready and walked down to the promenade on the Sea of Galilee (Olivia and Kate are in one room on the 10th floor, and Sara and I are in a different room on the 5th floor). We took some pictures, saw several feral cats, and ran into Janna and Daniel Palk from our group.

At 7am, we met Olivia and Kate for breakfast in the main dining room. I ended up having three cups of coffee this morning, and all were excellent. One was straight black, one was a cafe latte, and the other was a cappuccino. We all tried several different cheeses, which is a staple of breakfast in Israel.



After breakfast, we boarded the bus at 8am and began our journey to Zippori, which was our first destination. Along the way, we had some great views of upper Galilee from the right side of the bus. It is not quite as green as I saw it in January 2020 since they are in the dry season, but there is still a lot of green vegetation and green patches of land due to the massive irrigation in the area. Much of this irrigation comes from the Sea of Galilee.

When I was here two years ago, the Sea was really down due to lack of rain and irrigation, but Ami said that due to the higher-than-normal rainfall over the past year, the Sea of Galilee is back up to target levels. I was able to see this difference throughout the day.



Ami also pointed out all the solar panels on buildings along the way. As with any other part of the world, producing energy is always a concern. They don't have any oil in the country, but they do have LOTS of sunlight, so they make use of it to generate power.

Zippori (Sephoris)



When we first arrived at Zippori, Bruce presented Ami with a new Tilly hat from members of the group before we got off the bus. He had lost his previous Tilly hat and was very appreciative to receive a new one. Next, we started off with a short film about the history of this city.

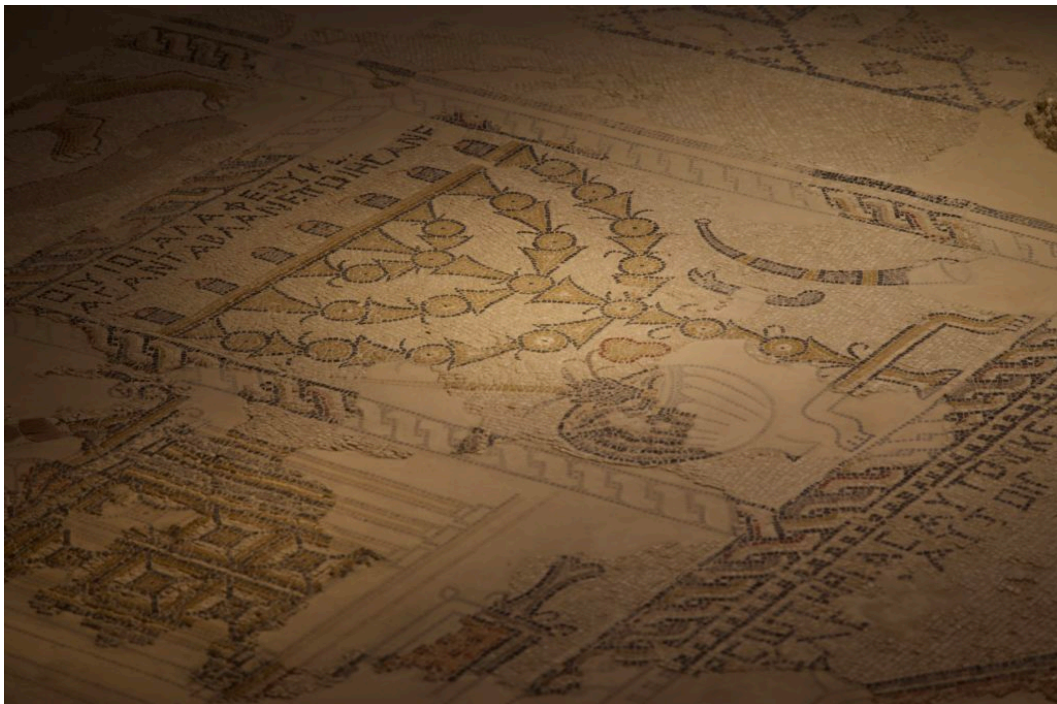
Zippori was a major city in lower Galilee, and it is four miles northwest of Nazareth. During the time of Jesus, it was a mixed city of the Romans and the Jews. It is never mentioned in the Bible, but it is possible that Jesus might have come here due to its proximity to His hometown of Nazareth.

The name of the city is derived from a word meaning bird because it is on a hill (i.e. bird's eye view). From the top of the hill, one has a 360-degree view of Galilee. During the crusades, its name was changed to Sephoris.

Zippori is very important in Jewish history as the Sanhedrin moved to Zippori in the 2nd or 3rd century AD. The Mishnah (oral tradition) was completed in Zippori during the 3rd century AD and is the basis of the Talmud and all Jewish law today.



Our first stop in Zippori was a 5th century AD synagogue. The hallmark of this synagogue is the incredibly intact mosaic floor. This floor was discovered in 1993 by someone doing work with a tractor.



The floor includes elements from temple worship in Jerusalem 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. This can also be seen in the fact that inscriptions within the mosaic are written in Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic.



Next was a small Greek style theater from the 2nd century AD. Ami pointed out that theaters were always built facing the best views, and this is no exception as it overlooks Galilee. Ami also pointed out that it was a theater and not an amphitheater as the latter would be a full circle. Theaters were used for entertainment and amphitheaters for sport.



As we continued walking up the hill, we came to the Jewish quarter which is filled with lots of Mikvah or ritual baths. These baths were very important in Jewish life as every Jew was to wash at least once per week in fresh, clear water before the sabbath. There were also many different ritual washings that were required by Judaism.



On top of the hill is a Citadel (fortress) from the period of the Crusades in the 11th to 12th century AD. Ami pointed out something that I had not noticed before. Some of the “stones” used to build the citadel were actually coffins.



You can clearly see one at the bottom corner of one of the sides. From the top of the hill, you definitely have a 360-degree view of Galilee, and you also have a view of the nearby Arab village of Nazareth.



Just below the Citadel are the remains of a private house from the 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.



Back down the hill, there is a public building known as the House of the Nile River from the 5th century AD (Byzantine Period). This building has a very detailed mosaic floor that contained scenes from the Nile River. The back side of the house also has mosaics depicting Amazon women from Greek mythology, a centaur, and a Roman soldier.



In the middle of all this, there is a large crack that is clearly visible from an 8th century AD earthquake. While touring this building, Ami taught us a little about how mosaics were made. The most fascinating part of this to me is that the stones are not painted. Different color stones are found to make the different designs.



The final thing we saw were Roman roads from the 2nd century AD. Ami pointed out that the Romans placed the stones diagonally to improve grip while walking on them. We were able to see games that had been carved in the road, and large ruts from chariots.



At the end of the visit, I asked Olivia, Kate, and Sara what their favorite things in Zippori were. Sara said the theater. Olivia, Kate, and I all said the mosaic floor from the synagogue.

Mt Arbel



Back on the bus we rode back across northern Galilee to Mt. Arbel, which is a place I had never been before. This not a biblical site (some claim it as the location of the great commission) but provides a great view of the northern end of the Sea of Galilee, which is the heart of Jesus' Galilean ministry. While today was very hot and hazy, it was still an awesome view.

Sea of Galilee

After Arbel, we drove back down to the shore for a boat ride on the Sea of Galilee. Even though it is known as a “Sea,” it is really a small lake with a surface area of 64 square miles. The lake is 13 miles from north to south and 7 miles from east to west.



On my last trip, there were many obvious signs that the level of the lake was down due to over irrigation and drought. This time, it looked a lot different near the shore because the last year had produced a lot of rainfall as mentioned above. One example is that two years ago the shore was covered with marsh. Today it was deep enough that kids were swimming near the bank.



This additional rain is needed, because the Sea of Galilee provides 40% of the fresh water to the surrounding area. 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.

The Sea of Galilee is also a very important location in scripture and is known by the following names:

- Sea of Chinnereth (Numbers 34:11; Joshua 12:3; 13:27)
- Sea of Gennesaret (Luke 5:1)
- Sea of Tiberias (John 6:1; 21:1)
- Sea of Galilee (Matthew 4:18)

The Gospels refer to the Sea of Galilee 53 times (48 times as “sea” or “Sea of Galilee”; five times as “lake”). Two significant events from Jesus’ life occurred directly on the Sea of Galilee:

- 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; John 6:16-21)



Just like last time, this boat ride is surreal. While there are many places in Israel that are “traditional,” and we don’t know whether the actual even happened there, this is definitely not the case with the Sea of Galilee. This IS the place where Jesus walked on the water, and the place where he calmed the storm. It is amazing to be floating on the same body of water. Sara said that this was her favorite thing we did today.



While on the boat, Bill, Mike, and Lee read scripture from the accounts of the miraculous catch of fish (Luke 5:1-11), Jesus calming the storm (Mark 4:35-41), and Jesus walking on the water (John 6:16-21). I said a few words about Jesus' Galilean ministry and that there is no doubt this is the location where Jesus performed the mighty works mentioned above. Derek then led us in "Master the Tempest is Raging" before we headed back to the dock.

Ancient Galilee Boat

Right next to the dock is a building housing an ancient boat that was discovered at the Sea of Galilee in 1986. We watched a movie about the boat and the preservation process. 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 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.



This boat is incredibly intact. While we have no idea whose boat it was, it is amazing to see what a fishing boat from the time of Jesus looked like.



By the time we left the ancient Galilee Boat, it was after 3pm, and we finally were able to get some lunch. We stopped by a place near Magdala and two of us had shawarma and two had falafel. My shawarma was delicious.

Capernaum



We drove to Capernaum on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee. This city was inhabited continuously from the 2nd century BC to the 11th century AD, when it was abandoned sometime before the Crusader conquest. According to Ami, the name Capernaum literally means City of Nahum, though we don't know which Nahum this is referencing.

This again is a very important location in scripture, especially in the ministry of Jesus. It was the home base of Jesus during His Galilean ministry, after he left Nazareth (Matthew 4:12-17) and was referred to as Jesus' "own city" in Matthew 9:1. 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 Matthew 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 (Matthew 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 (Matthew 11:21; Luke 10:13).

Jesus performed the following miracles in Capernaum:

- Healed Jairus' Daughter (Matthew 9:18–26; Mark 5:21–43; Luke 8:41–56)
- Caught a miraculous number of fish (John 21:4–14)
- Healed a demon possessed man (Mark 1:21–28)
- Healed Peter's mother-in-law (Matthew 8:14–15)
- Healed a paralytic (Matthew 9:2–8; Mark 2:1–12; Luke 5:17–20)

- Healed the centurion's servant (Matthew 8:5–13; Luke 7:1–10)
- Healed the woman with the issue of blood (Mark 5:21–43)

My favorite event that took place in Capernaum is the “bread of life” discourse from John 6 that comes after Jesus fed the 5000 and walked on the water in the same chapter.

Ami led us around the site. We first explored the excavations of the city from the time of Jesus. According to Ami, this was likely a small town filled with simple people based on the size of the dwellings.



In Capernaum is a synagogue from the 4th century AD that was built on top the synagogue from the 1st century AD (John 6:59).



Ami showed us a number of artifacts and carvings that have been recovered from the 1st century synagogue before we proceeded into the 4th century synagogue.



While in there, Ami allowed me to speak to the group about the events of John 6, and then to read from the “bread of life” discourse, culminating in John 6:59:

(ESV) “Jesus said these things in the synagogue, as he taught at Capernaum.”



This is very meaningful to me, and very humbling to be standing on the same place where we know this lesson was given.



Today you can clearly see the darker stones under the 4th century synagogue which were from the 1st century synagogue. Both Olivia and Kate said that visiting the synagogue was their favorite thing from today, and I think it would be mine as well.



Our final stop was St. Peter's Church. This is a modern Catholic pilgrimage church that is part of the Franciscan monastery. It is in the shape of an octagon and built on pillars over archaeological excavations. These excavations include a layer of residential structures from the 1st century on which a 5th century octagonal church was built during the Byzantine period. The residential structure is traditionally considered to be Peter's house from the account of Jesus healing Peter's mother-in-law in Matthew 8.

Mount of Beatitudes

We left Capernaum and made a short drive to the “Mount of Beatitudes” on the northwestern shore of Galilee between Capernaum and Magdala. This is the traditional location of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount from Matthew 5-7. The traditional spot was identified by the Byzantines approximately ~350 years after the event.



The site is a natural amphitheater, and the geography generally matches the account in the gospels. However, we have no idea whether this is the actual spot of this great sermon.



On top of the mountain is the Church of the Beatitudes which was built between 1936 and 1938 near the site of the fourth-century Byzantine ruins.

At the site, Ami allowed me to talk about the Beatitudes for a bit before Daniel read them from Matthew 5:1-12. After spending a few minutes walking around the site, we then got back on the bus and decided to try and squeeze in one more site before heading back to the hotel.

Magdala

This site was Magdala, which is on the western 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).

Some manuscripts of Matthew 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.



In Magdala, Ami took us to a large 1st century AD synagogue that has been excavated, and parts of its original mosaic floor are 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.



From there, we went to the excavation of a public bath area with a couple of Mikvah from the 1st century AD, similar to what we saw in Zippori earlier today. Ami then took us around to excavations of dwelling places and told us that based on the archaeology it appears that Magdala was a much larger city than Capernaum.



While the rest of the group was exploring the Franciscan church that has been built on the site, I went to look at the excavations of 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 that has recently been found. When I was here two years ago, it was hard to see the lake from this spot because the water was so low. Today it was less than 100 yards from the port, which was neat to see.



I then joined the rest of our group in the church building and visited a new chapel that has been built in the basement of the structure. The floor of this chapel was made of stones from the archaeological site and at the far end is a painting depicting the woman reaching out to touch the garment of Jesus and be healed (Mark 5:21-43). This has all been constructed since the last time I was here.

After leaving Magdala, it was just after 6pm, and we were all completely exhausted. It was over 100° this afternoon, most of which with no breeze. That is by far the biggest difference I've noticed from my last trip, which was in January. Today was brutally hot, and I drank a ton of water.



It was good to get back to the hotel, take a shower, and then eat a leisurely dinner with our family. After dinner we went down to the promenade by the Sea of Galilee, and Olivia and Kate ended up playing with cats for most of our time down there.

As this day ends, it's hard to believe how much we saw. This was by far the most things I've seen in one day in Israel. Tomorrow we are supposed to start in Nazareth before heading up to the Galilean Peninsula for Tel Dan and Caesarea Philippi.

Day 5 - Nazareth Village, Tel Dan, Caesarea Philippi (May 31, 2022)

I slept much better last night and didn't wake up until my alarm went off at 6am. Sara followed soon after at 6:30am. We didn't get to see the sunrise today, but at least we got a full night's sleep.



After breakfast in the dining room (had 4 cups of coffee today), we boarded the bus to head towards lower Galilee and the city of Nazareth. I had not visited Nazareth on my previous trip, so that was a new experience for me.

Nazareth Village



Today Nazareth is an Arab city and is the largest in lower Galilee with a population of approximately 100,000 people. Of this population about 70% identify as Muslim and 30% as Christian. There is not a ton to see archaeologically in modern Nazareth, but the modern city is built on the same location as ancient Nazareth, though it is much, much larger.



From a Biblical perspective, Nazareth is known because it was the hometown of Jesus. He is frequently identified as a Nazarene in passages such as Matt 2:23; 26:71; Mark 1:24; 10:47; 14:67; 16:6; Luke 4:34; 18:37; 24:19; John 18:7; 19:19; Acts 2:22; 3:6; 4:10; 6:14; 22:8; 26:9.



Our destination within the city today was “Nazareth Village,” which is operated by the YMCA. This is in part an archaeological site and in part a recreated village and farm to show what life would have been like in Nazareth during the time of Jesus. When we arrived, there was a beautiful rooster standing on the entrance steps. Within minutes he had crowed three times and I joked that this must be the traditional Peter rooster and that they will be building a cathedral soon in his honor.



Inside we met our guide Daniel who is a Christian Jew, originally from Romania, who now lives in Nazareth. He spent a few minutes explaining what we would be seeing, and that the site of the village was approximately a 10-minute walk from where the original ancient Nazareth would have been located.



During our tour of the site, he explained to us about what farming would have been like in the first century. This included growing wheat and vegetables and raising sheep. We also got to see a very small replica of what a first-century tomb would have looked like, though we will get to see actual first-century tombs in Jerusalem.



The village is located on the side of a hill, and as we moved up the site Daniel showed us some of the archeological discoveries that have been excavated. We saw a wine press from the first century that had been carved into the rock. It consists of a flat basin where the grapes would have been pressed by walking on them with bare feet. Shoes were not used because they might crush the seed which could give the wine a bitter taste. Below the basin was a vat that had been hollowed out to collect the juice from the grape as it came down the hill. In the picture above, we are standing in the press, and you can see the vat just below our feet.



Also along the hill were rock terraces that create flat shelves to allow for farming on a slope. There is also the remains of a rock tower at the top of the hill. Daniel explained that the footings of the terraces and tower were original and that ancient rocks from the site have been stacked on top of them to show their location.

Daniel suggested that maybe this spot was the inspiration for the parable of the tenants that Jesus told in Matthew 21:33-46. That parable is about a farmer who planted a vineyard and mentions a wine press and a tower, and all three were found at this site. A very interesting theory, but obviously we have no way to know.



Next, we saw a recreated olive press where Daniel explained how olive oil was made. First it is crushed with a millstone into a mash. Next it is pressed three times. The first oil is given to God and the last is used for things like lamps.



We then had a presentation about carpentry and making fabrics. During this presentation, he mentioned that the Greek word for carpentry would have included working with stone and that this means Joseph would also been a stone worker. Will have to do some more research on this because I've never heard this before.



Our final stop was a replica Synagogue modeled after originals found in Nazareth. Daniel talked about the story in Luke 4:16-30 where Jesus was in the synagogue in Nazareth and read the prophecy from Isaiah 61 and said that it had been fulfilled by Him. Jesus later said that "no prophet is acceptable in his hometown."

At the conclusion of the tour, Daniel told us that before the pandemic started, they were averaging over 120,000 visitors per year.

Jordan River

After Nazareth Village, we reunited with Ami and began the long drive back to eastern side of the Sea of Galilee and then began traveling north through the Golan Heights. Along the way saw the Jordan river, which is the first time I've seen it north of Galilee.



The Jordan River is fed by four tributaries (1) Hasbani River, (2) Baniyas River, (3) Dan River, and the (4) Lyyon Stream. The river rises on the slopes of Mount Hermon and flows southward through northern Israel to the Sea of Galilee. Exiting the sea, it continues south before emptying into the Dead Sea. The Jordan River is more than 223 miles in length, but, because its course is meandering, the actual distance between its source and the Dead Sea is less than 124 miles.

The diversion of river water by both Israel and Jordan has significantly diminished the Jordan's flow into the Dead Sea and has been a major factor in the considerable drop in the Dead Sea's water level since the 1960s.

From a Biblical perspective, the Jordan is mentioned over 180 times in the Old Testament and 15 times in the New Testament. Here are some notable highlights:

- First mentioned in Gen 13:10: 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 baptized Jesus in the Jordan River (Matt 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22).

Golan Heights



As we continued traveling north through the Golan Heights, Ami talked to us a lot about the history of Israel and Syria and their dispute over this territory. We saw the Israel / Syria border as it was before 1967 and the 6-day war. We saw lots of fields with warning signs about mines.

Ami explained that today the Golan Heights is filled with nature reserves, new development, and numerous military positions. We saw several orchards that Ami said contained pomegranate, peach, and cherry trees. There are also lots of olive trees, and the landscape is covered in basalt rock. We also saw several vineyards as we drove along.



Our next stop of the day was at a lookout near Syria within the Golan Heights that is approximately 3,000 ft above sea level. Because of the elevation it was very cool and pleasant to stand outside.



At the lookout, Ami told us about Israel occupying the Golan Heights in 1967 and taking it from Syria and reclaiming all the territory lost in 1948. This was the 6-Day War and is considered a great victory for Israel. He then explained 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 that was called into service as fighting began. He was a tank driver and commander. He explained how the war was not going well for Israel until America began providing ammunition and equipment.



He talked to us about the terrible experiences from that war and about losing one of his men, which occurred 2 hours before the cease fire. He tried to save him but was unsuccessful. He talked about going to the funerals of fallen soldiers and how hard it was to be with their families.

While telling this story, he told us a little more about his personal life. Right after the war was over, he was 24 years old and got married. He is still married to her today, and they have two children and three grandchildren.



After leaving the lookout, we continued driving north and soon was able to see Mt. Hermon in the distance with a little snow still on top. Mt. Hermon is the tallest point in Israel at 9,232 above sea level. As we continued driving, we got closer and closer to the mountain, and I was able to see it better than I ever did on my last trip.



We stopped as Mas'Ada for lunch, with a great view of Mt. Hermon from the parking lot. Ami told us that this village has a large Druze population. This is a mysterious religion that incorporates elements from many different faiths.



Lunch was at the Birkat Ram Restaurant, and Olivia, Kate and I all had Labne which is a type of cheese made from strained yogurt. It was placed on a pastry sheet with olive oil and toasted. This was one of the best lunches I've had in Israel. So good. Sara decided to get a schnitzel, which is fried chicken in a pita.



As we left Mas'Ada, we drove along the Hermon Mountain range. We saw lots of terrace farming on the hills surrounding Hermon and saw a fortress from the time of the crusades. This entire route was new to me, and it was awesome to see so much of Mt. Hermon.

Caesarea Philippi



As we reached the foothills of Mt. Hermon, we came to Caesarea Philippi. This city was originally built by Herod Philip, the second son of Herod the Great at the southwestern base of Mount Hermon. I loved coming into Caesarea Philippi from this direction, because it gave me a great sense of it really being at the base of Mt. Hermon.

The ancient city was adjacent to a spring, grotto, and related shrines dedicated to the Greek god Pan. Pan had the face and upper torso of a human and the horns, beard, and lower body of goat. He was the god of forests.



Caesarea Philippi 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.



When we arrived at the site, we walked over to a shaded area near the Hermon Spring, and Bruce read to us from Matthew 16 and the account of the great confession mentioned above. Ami then began to talk to us about this confession, but also about the god Pan and other deities that were worshiped up on the rock.



The group crossed the bridge over the spring and then climbed up to the grotto and the site where the temple of Pan used to stand. It was interesting to me to see the changes, because the grotto seemed to be about three times larger than it was two years ago when I was here, and it was surrounded by a fence and some equipment. Ami said that they had been working on it for a while but didn't seem to know what they were doing.



Up near the rock, I spoke to the group about the possibility that Jesus telling Peter that “upon this rock I will build my church” might have been inspired by Jesus’ view of this giant rock in the foothills of Mt. Hermon.



When I was in ʒCaesarea Philippi two years ago, we were able to get permission to visit the recently uncovered remains of the palace of Herod Agrippa II. It is across the street from the main site, behind a locked fence, but was part of ancient Caesarea Philippi. While at the palace two years ago, I fell on some steps and smashed two fingers in my left hand. This injury required surgery and several screws and wires to repair.



I tell that backstory to explain what has been happening the last two days. Ever since we arrived, I have been begging / nagging Ami about being able to go back to the palace. This is not a normal site that is toured and is still behind a locked gate. Well, today he found someone who let us in the gate, and then I led a few members of our group to the archaeological excavation and explained to them the significance of Herod Agrippa II.

Agrippa II was the son of Agrippa I who had the apostle James killed and Peter arrested in Acts 12. He also died in that same chapter after being eaten by worms in Caesarea Philippi. When Agrippa I died, Agrippa II was only 18-years-old and living in Rome. Because of his young age, he did not immediately take his father's command, but eventually was given the northern part of Palestine and his territory continued to grow.

Agrippa II was the last Herod to also be called king and was the one who tried Paul in Caesarea Maritima in Acts 25 and 26. He had a palace in Caesarea Philippi, which was his administrative center, and this is what we were able to tour today. In 61 AD, King Agrippa II renamed Caesarea Philippi as Neronias in honor of Roman Emperor Nero.



Today I was able to successfully make it down the stairs into the tunnels within the bottom level of the palace. This site is remarkable intact to be from the first century AD. Everyone who joined me seemed to be thrilled to be able to see it, and it really makes me wonder why they don't open it up to more people. Whatever the case, I'm grateful we were able to explore it today.



Tel Dan



Our final stop of the day was Tel Dan, which is a short drive from Caesarea Philippi. It is also located at the foot of Mt. Hermon. The snow on top of Mt. Hermon supplies the four tributaries to the Jordan River mentioned above, and the largest of these tributaries is Dan Springs. We saw this stream as we walked through the nature reserve toward the ancient city. The spring moves very fast and supplies 1/3 of the water to the Jordan River.



We took a slightly different route through the nature reserve this time than I did two years ago, and it was much more rocky. Our first stop once we reached the ancient city was the temple of Jeroboam. Once we got there, the group sat down on the Bema (High Place) across from the altar while Ami told us about the history of Dan.

The tribe of Dan, originally given territory on the southern coast, migrated there when they could not defeat the Philistine coastal inhabitants (Joshua 19:40–48). A group of Danites went north to Laish and destroyed it (Judges 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 Kingdom (1 Kings 12:26–33). He built a large altar and temple complex at Dan (and at Bethel; see 1 Kings 12:29) 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 Kings 12:28).



Once Ami finished speaking, I read to the group from 1 Kings 12, and explained how seeing things like this altar helps to show us that these accounts in scripture are true. There really was a temple in Dan built by Jeroboam. This is one of my favorite sites in all of Israel.

Next, we walked to a lookout near the border with Lebanon, and Ami told us a little about the history of Lebanon and Israel. As we were walking to the next site, I told him that I was from Lebanon....Lebanon, Tennessee. This started a conversation about Tennessee from an earlier trip he had made there.



The next stop was Abraham's Gate, which is an 18th century BC Canaanite gate (almost 4,000 years old) made out of mud bricks that is remarkably intact and has not been restored in any way. This is likely the oldest gate ever discovered in the world. It is called Abraham's gate because of the account of Abraham visiting Dan (Laish) in Genesis 14, which is the first mention of this city in the Bible.



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 (Genesis 14:14). The thinking is that perhaps Abraham went through this gate when he came to Dan. 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 Genesis 14 likely reflects a later updating of the text to use the Israelite name instead of the Canaanite name for the site.

Our final stop was to the reconstructed walls and gate of Ancient Dan. This area has been extensively reconstructed from stones found on site by the University of Chicago. While it looks really neat, it is definitely not as impressive or memorable as original sites like Jeroboam's temple and Abraham's gate.



However, within this are, Ami told us about a very important archaeological discovery that was made at Dan. It was 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." I spoke to the group about the importance of this find. Prior to 1993, opponents of the Bible would ask how there could possibly be a king with the power and influence of David with no archaeological evidence of his existence. Well, that evidence was found in 1993.

One final note about Dan in scripture. The phrase "From Dan to Beersheba" is used nine times to refer to the settled areas of the Tribes of Israel between Dan in the North and Beersheba in the South (Judges 20:1; 1 Samuel 3:20; 2 Samuel 3:10, 17:11, 24:2, 15; 1 Kings 4:25; 1 Chronicles 21:2; 2 Chronicles 30:5).

Upon leaving Dan, we began the long drive back to the hotel. I actually took a little nap on the bus, which was really nice. I was nowhere near as tired as I was on Monday evening but was still pretty gassed from another eventful day.



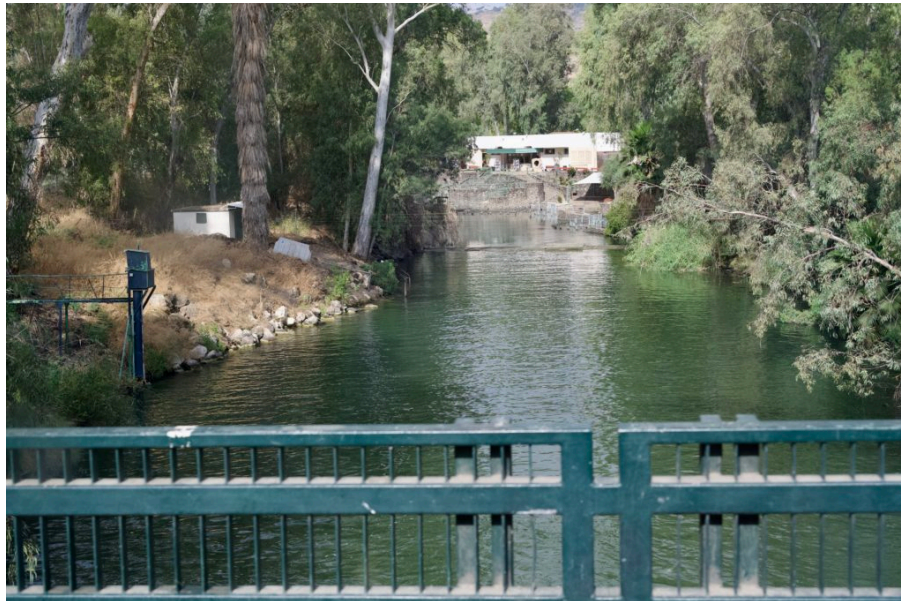
After cleaning up, we had another delicious dinner in the main dining room and then walked out on the promenade by the Sea of Galilee. There is a public piano on the promenade, and Sara played “Fairy Tale” for us, which was really nice. I uploaded a video of her playing that can be accessed below for anyone who is interested.

<https://youtu.be/wBWWWHl-cr0>

Day 6 - Bet-She'an, Qumran, En-Gedi, Dead Sea (June 1, 2022)



I woke up again at 6am this morning, just before Sara. We had to pack up our luggage since we are transitioning down to the Dead Sea area today. We met Olivia and Kate at 6:40am for a quick walk on the promenade by the Sea of Galilee before breakfast.



After breakfast, we loaded up the bus and began to head toward our first destination to the south. Along the way we drove down beside the Sea of Galilee and got a glimpse of the Jordan River as it exits the lake.



A little further south in the Jordan Valley, Ami pointed out the Jordan River as it curves across the landscape with the country of Jordan just on the other side. He also pointed out the Gilead Mountains in Jordan where the prophet Elijah was from (1 Kings 17:1).

Bet-She'an



Our first stop today was Bet-She'an, which is an amazing archeological site. Even though Bet-She'an is mentioned in the Bible, most of the excavations today are from the Byzantine Period during the 4th and 5th centuries AD.

The book of Joshua first mentions Bet-She'an 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 walls of Bet-She'an 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.

Bet-She'an eventually came under Israelite control, and according to 1 Kgs 4:12, it became one of King Solomon's administrative districts.



Bet-She'an is located about five miles northeast of Mt. Gilboa along the Harod Brook, where the Jezreel Valley meets the Jordan Valley. The site today contains a large Tel comprised of approximately 20 strata dating back to 5th century BC. This Tel has mostly not been excavated. It is likely that within one of these strata is the wall where Saul's body was hung.



During the Hellenistic period, the city spread out around the tel, eventually encompassing over 400 acres. During the Hellenistic Period, the city was included in the Decapolis under the name of Scythopolis ("city of the Scythians").



Before we even arrived to the entrance of Bet-She'an, we were able to see an excavated amphitheater from the bus. I did not see this last time I was here. An amphitheater was a complete oval arena and was used for sport (Usually gladiator fights to the death).



Once we arrived at the main site, Ami talked to us about the city, the history of the relationship between Israel and the Philistines, and about the death of Saul from 1 Samuel 31 and David's lament from 2 Samuel 1.

He said that at its peak Bet-She'an had a population of over 45,000. The structures within the city were made of basalt, limestone, and marble. The marble was imported from other parts of the Roman Empire because it is not found in Israel.



Ami then led us through the site starting with a very large Greek-style theater that is incredibly intact. He explained to us about its construction and the use of the Roman arch for the entrances to the theater.



Next, we moved to a public toilet that is just down from the theater, and many in the group took turns “trying them out,” including Kate, Sara, & Olivia.



We then saw shop fronts along a city street.



All along the way, Ami pointed out fallen columns that have been excavated that were destroyed in earthquake. The columns were left in place and new structures built on top of them.



Ami led a few of us up to the top of the Tel...



...which provided an incredible view of the entire site.



After coming down, we visited Palladius Street that was lined with columns and had an underground drainage “pipe” running under the street. This street is incredibly impressive.



Our final stop was a bath house that includes 3 rooms (1) hot room or sauna (2) cold room (3) cool room for transition from sauna to cold. Note the remains of pillars made of mud bricks that were used to lift up the floor. Slaves would burn wood outside through arches to heat the sauna. This was a very large structure, and Ami equated it to a modern-day country club.



Around the bath house there are roads where you can see several layers or strata over the centuries. One of these layers contained intricate mosaics.



As we left Bet-She'an, I read from 1 Samuel 31 about the death of Saul and his body and armor being taken to Bet-She'an. Ami then read the lamentation of David from 2 Samuel 1. Right as we were reading the passages, we drove by Mt. Gilboa which is the place where Saul and Jonathan died.



We continued south along the Jordan valley on left and soon came to the Samaritan mountains to right.



Later we transitioned from the Samaritan mountains to the Judean mountains as the terrain became more and more desert like.

Qumran



Our next stop was at Qumran which we entered after just having seen the Dead Sea for the first time. When we got off the bus, it was still very hot, but the air was much drier, which was nice. The last time I came to Qumran it was in January and it had just stopped raining when we arrived. Didn't feel like it was going to rain there anytime soon today.



Qumran is the site where many of the Dead Sea Scrolls were found beginning in 1947. It was also the home of the Essenes during the time of Jesus, who were one of the three Jewish sects identified by Josephus. At the site, Ami told us about the Essenes. They were a group of scholars who left Jerusalem to setup a new community for themselves in Qumran with no contact to the larger Jewish world.

They committed themselves to preserve the word of God on scrolls. The scribes made meticulous copies with no mistakes. If any mistakes were made, the scroll would be buried because you cannot destroy the word of God.

When the confrontation became intense between the Jews and Romans in 66 AD at the time of the first Jewish revolt, the Essenes placed their scrolls in jars and hid them in caves to protect them. When the Romans eventually destroyed the village, they didn't find the scrolls. They weren't found until almost 2000 years later.

Qumran is a very important archaeological site, 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 and Nehemiah, including the entire book of Isaiah. This discovery proves that the Old Testament we have today is essentially the same as what Jesus had during his time. The wordings / translations are very similar to what we have today.



Ami took us on a tour of the site, and we walked through the excavations of the ancient village of Qumran. We saw “Cave 1” at the top of the mountain at the northern end of the site where three Bedouin farmers found the first 8 clay jars in 1947 (Including the book of Isaiah). These farmers had no idea what they had found and sold them to a dealer in Jericho for \$16.



We saw numerous mikvah or ritual baths in the village. Ami said that a scribe would have to fully wash before writing, so there would have been a need for many baths.



We saw an aqueduct used to transport water throughout the city as well as a couple of cisterns used to hold water.



At the southern end of the site, we saw "Cave 4" down in a valley of the Qumran Wadi. Bedouin farmers discovered this cave in 1952 and ultimately 15,000 scroll fragments were found that made up 530 total scrolls. This is my favorite part of the site. After completing our tour, the whole group went inside the visitor center for lunch.



After lunch, while most of the group was shopping, our family went back out to the site with Daniel and Jana Palk and hiked part of the way up to one of the caves (after some research, I believe it is cave 6, but am not 100% confident this is correct).



On the way we met a young man from Korea named Minoah, who joined us for part of the hike. This was a lot of fun and provided some great views of the site and the Dead Sea.

En-Gedi



Back on the bus, we continued to head south along the Dead Sea toward the En-Gedi Nature Preserve. The name 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. When I was here in January 2020, there were Ibex everywhere, but we only saw a very few today from a long distance away. Ami said that they do not like to come out of the caves in the heat.



En-Gedi is mentioned numerous times in the Old Testament:

- Joshua 15:62 first mentions En-Gedi in the tribal allotment given to Judah.
- 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 2 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.
- 2 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 prophesies about 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" (Ezekiel 47:10).



At En-Gedi, Ami took us to one of the lower waterfalls, and told us about the history of David and Saul at this place.



After he finished, about half of our group made the hike to the top of En-Gedi, seeing numerous waterfalls and incredible views, culminating with the beautiful David Waterfall.



This place is breathtaking, and we hiked a lot further today than we did when I was here in 2020.



Back on the bus we continued heading south to our hotel in the resort area of Ein Bokek, where we will be staying for one night.

The Dead Sea



Once we arrived at the hotel, we quickly took our luggage up to our rooms and changed into our bathing suits for a float on the Dead Sea.

The Dead Sea is the lowest place in the world at 1,412 ft (430m) 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 at its lowest point.

The Dead Sea used to be much larger, but 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. Today the northern and southern parts of the Dead Sea are completely disconnected, and they must channel water from the northern part to the southern resort area where our hotel was located.

Along the way down on the bus, we could see numerous sinkholes that have been caused by rapidly receding waters.

There are 16 references to the Dead Sea in scripture. It is referred to 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).

The names are used once each to communicate direction (toward the). Only once is the Dead Sea designated as a location (Gen 14:3). The remaining 12 references to the Dead Sea are used in the context of describing the borders of the promised land.

At the beach in Ein Bokek, I watched Olivia, Kate and Sara get in the Dead Sea and float for the first time. I loved seeing their reactions when they laid back in the water. After recording a little video and taking some pictures, I joined them in the Dead Sea. Floating here is surreal, and unlike anything I've experienced anywhere else. There is absolutely no way to NOT float.



Another thing I loved seeing today was my co-leader, Bruce Zupa, floating in the Dead Sea with his daughter Lisa and Granddaughters Becca and Stacey Layne. Bruce has been to Israel six times before, but today was the first time he's ever floated. I'm glad I got to see it.

It was a lot of fun hanging out with our group in the Dead Sea and seeing most of them experience it for the first time. We ended up spending over an hour there floating, talking, and playing (not splashing). Both Kate and Sara said that this was their favorite thing today, and I'm not surprised.



One note about the difference between today and my last trip. Back in January 2020, the entire bottom of the sea, all the way from the shore, was coated in large balls of salt, just slightly smaller than golf balls. Today you had to walk out a long way to find even small balls of salt, and much farther to find the larger ones. I'm very curious as to why this is different. Is it the temperature? Is it that the water levels are higher? I'm not sure but do find it fascinating.

After getting cleaned up, we had a delicious dinner in the very busy main dining room before calling it a day. All-in-all this was another fantastic day in Israel.

Day 7 - Masada, Tel Be'er Sheva, Valley of Elah (June 2, 2022)



This morning Olivia and I both got up just before 6am. Our two rooms were right next to each other this time, so we let the girls be together last night. This was our only night in Ein Bokek, as we will be staying in Jerusalem for our final four nights.



We met up with Kate and Sara around 6:45am and walked down to the Dead Sea to take a few pictures before heading back to breakfast. This breakfast was not as good as in Tiberius, but had a couple of really good cafe lattes, so all was not a loss. Our group loaded our bags and boarded the bus at 8:15am, and we headed off to Masada.

Masada



Masada is a mountain (mesa) that rises almost 1,500ft above the Dead Sea in the Judean Wilderness, but this is still just barely above sea level. The name Masada means “fortress.” Everything we know about Masada comes from Josephus and archaeological excavations. Herod the Great built two palaces on the mountain and fortified Masada between 37 and 31 BC. The palaces of Herod the Great were essentially abandoned by his sons after his death in 4 BC.



The site was taken over by the Jewish zealots (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.

According to Josephus, the siege of Masada by Roman troops from 70 to 73 AD, at the end of the First Jewish–Roman War, ended in the mass suicide of the 960 Sicarii rebels who were hiding there. However, the archaeological evidence relevant to this event is ambiguous at best and rejected entirely by some scholars. According to Josephus, when it became clear that the Romans were going to take over Masada, on April 15, 73 A.D., on the instructions of Ben Yair (in the synagogue), all but two women and five children, who hid in the cisterns and later told their stories, took their own lives rather than live as Roman slaves. Today it is hard to believe that the women in the cisterns could have heard what was being said in the Synagogue, which was relatively far away (more on that below). Whatever the case, this story is a source of great Jewish pride today.

Upon arrival at Masada, we first watched a short movie that told the story of Josephus about the mass suicide as mentioned above. After the movie, Ami took us outside and we boarded a large cable car to ride to the top.



From the top, the views of the Wilderness of Judea and the Dead Sea below, are simply breathtaking. One thing I noticed is that it was not as hot as I feared. Thankfully we were visiting in the early morning because I imagine that it would have been unbearable in the mid-day heat.



We entered Masada through the Snake Path Gate, which is from the time of Herod the Great. The Snake Path and Snake Path Gate 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.



Inside the Snake Path Gate, Ami pointed out the plaster covering the stone.



From there he took us to a shaded area to talk to us about the excavations at Masada. He also said that a common misconception is that Masada was destroyed by the Romans, but they simply conquered it. Masada was actually destroyed by earthquakes because of its proximity to a fault line.



Next, he took us to a quarry from the time of Herod the Great that was used to mine the rocks needed for building the palaces and other structures. Unlike other Roman structures built by Herod the Great, no outside materials were brought in to build this fortress. This is likely because it is so isolated.



We saw the Commander's House, and again Ami pointed out the plaster covering the rock walls.



He also explained to us how columns were made with multiple circular rocks stacked like pancakes, but then covered in plaster to make it look like it was one piece. He also told us that some of the excavations have found Hebrew inscriptions in the stones, which likely means that Herod used Jewish slaves to build Masada.



From there we entered the Northern Palace Complex and were able to see some of the storehouses used for olive oil, wine, and grain. I had previously been told that the holes in the bottom of the storehouses were for wheat and barley, but today Ami said that they were used to catch any spilled olive oil. Guess this is a topic that requires further research.



Our next stop was a bath house with the same 3 types of rooms from the bath house in Bet-She'an: (1) Cold room (2) Cool room (3) Hot room or sauna.



In the Sauna, the floor was raised by a series of short pillars. Fires were set through arches under the floor by the servants. Hot air 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. The more I tour these type of bath houses, and even seeing this specific site again, the better I understand how they worked.



Inside the bathhouse, Ami pointed out a mikvah that had been added by the Byzantine Christians who took over the site in the 5th century AD.



One of my favorite parts of this bathhouse is the very short door just before the steam room. I wonder if this means that Herod was short, or if the builder was short.



Our last stop in the Norther Complex, was the three-tiered Palace that was built into the side of the mountain. It is incredible that they were able to build something like this over 2,000 years ago.



Ami told us that this palace was mentioned by Josephus but not understood until the archaeological excavations began. Ami explained that this location was likely chosen because there is a consistent breeze on that corner of the mesa.



While up in this area, Ami talked to us a little about Herod the Great. He was a Roman ruler that liked to play both sides. He built up the city of Jerusalem and took a Jewish wife, but both were likely political maneuvers. He eventually killed his Jewish wife as he got older, and this was one of the reasons why it was said that “it was better to be his dog than a member of his family.” Ami also said that no one knows whether Herod ever came to Masada. It was likely built to be an escape refuge.



Down below the palace, on the desert floor, Ami pointed out the squares where they have excavated the Roman encampments from when they brought 8,000 troops against Masada, and laid siege for three years. These 8,000 soldiers were from the 10th legion and were spread out over 8 camps.



Next, we saw one of the cisterns from the fortress before Ami explained the intricate water system to us. There were channels cut into the Mesa that collected rainwater and automatically filled cisterns throughout the fortress.



Later, as we were leaving, we were able to see one of these channels (aqueducts) up close.



We then went to the 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"). While Josephus is known for his accurate accounts of Jewish history, it seems almost impossible for him to know this. While many today 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. My personal view is that all the Jews at Masada likely died at the hands of the Romans. I mention the traditional view above about the women and children hiding in a cistern and hearing Eleazar ben Ya'ir. From there they supposedly went and told Josephus. We don't know which cistern it was, but as Ami was speaking, I walked over to the closest cistern, and took off my headset. Not only could I not understand what he was saying, I couldn't even tell he was talking. This doesn't definitively prove anything, but just makes me even more wary of the traditional story. However, ultimately no one really knows what happened at Masada.



As Ami lead us out of the synagogue, we came to 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).



Our final stop was to see the point where the Romans built a ramp and breached the casement wall during the attack in 73 AD.



Before heading back to the cable car, Ami took us to another shaded area and told us a version of the traditional suicide story with a few differences that were interesting. He then told us about his service in the Israeli Army and his soldier ceremony at Masada. He said that after every soldier completes basic training, they are brought to Masada and given a Bible. The idea is that everyone must serve to protect Israel in the hope that the Jews will never have to do what was done at Masada again. Today they have a powerful army, and they will protect themselves. Even though I don't necessarily believe the traditional story, this is an awesome ceremony.



After a cable car ride down to the visitor center, we boarded the bus and headed back to the Dead Sea resort area. From there we turned and headed out across the Judea Mountains into the north end of the Negev Desert toward Tel Be'er Sheva. We stopped briefly at an observation point where you can clearly see the pools formed by the barrier walls in the resort area of the Dead Sea. This is to help maintain the water level with the water being channeled from the north to the south.



Along the way we passed many Bedouin villages and even saw several camels.

Tel Be'er Sheva / Be'er Sheba



It was much cooler at Tel Be'er Sheva since we were at a much higher elevation. Tel Be'er Sheva 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 Israelite period. 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. "From Dan to Beersheba" is a biblical phrase used nine times to refer to the settled areas of the Tribes of Israel between Dan in the North and Beersheba in the South (Judges 20:1; 1 Samuel 3:20; 2 Samuel 3:10, 17:11, 24:2, 15; 1 Kings 4:25; 1 Chronicles 21:2; 2 Chronicles 30:5).

It was 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)
- 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).



Once we arrived at the Tel, Ami led us to the top and then talked to the group about the site. He read to us from Genesis 21, and the account of Abraham and Abimelech and their oath or covenant. Next Daniel read from Genesis 46 where God had promised Jacob at Beersheba that he would make him a great nation in Egypt and then bring them back to the promised land.



Ami showed us 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.



We also saw the remains of the city wall (most of this has been reconstructed / note the tan line near the ground). From there he led us into the city and showed us around the site.



We saw the city gate (again, much has been reconstructed)



A 4-room house



The modern city of Beer-Sheba...



Finally, we were able to go into the water system at Tel Be'er Sheva. Normally this is entered from on top of the Tel, but today we had to go in through the exit at the bottom. This water system was designed to bring in water from the Hebron Mountains via wadi and channels into cisterns deep inside the Tel.



Olivia was very brave and went through these tunnels with us. She is extremely claustrophobic but did well.



On the way to our next site, we stopped and had lunch at a place that served coffee, salads, and sandwiches. I have no idea what the name of it was because it was all in Hebrew. Ordering was a bit of an adventure, but the food was good, and my cappuccino was excellent.



As we continued north, we took a wrong turn and ended up in the West Bank. The bus had to turn around and go back through the checkpoint, at which point an armed soldier boarded the bus for inspection.



After we got on the correct road, we could clearly see the wall separating Israel from the West Bank.



Even though we were headed toward the Valley of Elah, this was also the route north to Jerusalem. The terrain kept changing the entire way. More and more trees and vegetation, and we kept climbing to higher elevations. We saw numerous herds of sheep along the way.

Valley of Elah



The bus eventually pulled off on the side of the road and we walked across a field to the Valley of Elah. The Valley of Elah is the modern Wadi es-Sant, and is the location where David killed Goliath in 1 Samuel 17 (Also mentioned in 21:9 in connection with the battle). It is home to several important archaeological sites, including those identified as the ancient towns of Azekah and Socho (1 Sam 17:1).



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.



At the wadi, Ami talked to us a bit and then I read the account of David and Goliath in 1 Samuel 17.



After this, we all selected five smooth stones from the wadi just like David did.



I enjoyed watching the girls select their stones. The last time I was here it was almost dark, so it was nice to see it in the full daylight.



Back on the bus, we continued to climb toward Jerusalem. Derek led us in some hymns about Jerusalem and Zion, and I really enjoyed the singing.

Mount Scopus



Once we entered Jerusalem, we stopped briefly at an overlook on Mount Scopus where we got our first glimpse of the Old City of Jerusalem.



Ami read from Psalm 122, which is one of the Psalms of Ascent and a blessing for Jerusalem.



After spending a few minutes there, we drove to the Olive Tree hotel and checked in. Dinner tonight was very nice as we spent some time in wonderful conversation with Daniel and Jana Palk. I've really enjoyed getting to know them more on this trip. They are a wonderful couple. I'm now looking forward to a good night's sleep and a busy day in Jerusalem tomorrow.

Day 8 - Western Wall, Southern Steps, City of David, Jewish Quarter (June 3, 2022)

Sara and I are back to being roommates in Jerusalem because our two rooms are far apart again. We both got up at 6:30am and then met Olivia and Kate for Breakfast in the main dining room, which was pretty uninspiring...even the coffee. Thankfully the rest of the day was filled with inspiration. We boarded the bus around 8:15 and set off for the Old City of Jerusalem.



“Old City” of Jerusalem

On the way, Ami reminded us that all buildings in Jerusalem must be covered with “Jerusalem Stone, which is limestone. He talked about how Jerusalem is considered the holiest city in the world because it is important to Jews, Christians, and Muslims. On a side note, the “Old City” is largely NOT the city of Jesus’ time but is built on top of the city of Jesus’ time. The whole city is a Tel with many strata. It covers one square kilometer and has a population of 50,000 people. Greater Jerusalem is over 800,000.

The walls around the old city were built in 1536 by the Turks. The city wall has eight gates, and the Golden Gate (or Gate of Mercy), has been sealed since medieval times. Today we walked through three of the city gates including:



Dung Gate (Leads to the Western Wall)



Zion Gate (Notice all the bullet holes)



Jafa Gate

The Old City is today divided into quarters: Armenian, Christian, Jewish, and Muslim. Later in the day we visited the Jewish Quarter. More on that to come.

Western Wall / Southern Steps



Our first stop in Jerusalem was the Western Wall also known as the “Wailing Wall.” On my first trip to Jerusalem, we didn’t spend much time here at all, but this was not the case today. We ended up seeing and learning a lot of things that I did not get in 2020.

So, what is the Western Wall? 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 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 (above) are some of the holiest places in Islam and are located on the Temple Mount. Jews come to this wall to pray for the rebuilding of the temple and for the Messiah to come (they also pray for other things as well - more on this below).



They write prayers on pieces of paper and stuff them in the cracks of the walls. The head Rabbi periodically takes all the paper and burns them.



As we arrived at the wall, we first had to go through security, and then Ami explained the significance of the Western wall to the Jews.



He talked about the Orthodox Hasidic Jews wearing their phylacteries, and just as he was talking about this, I saw one young man carrying a machine gun and wearing his phylactery. He said that to him the term “Wailing” is no longer relevant that they do not wail, they simply pray. He said that wailing was previously because of Arab corruption of the site, but now that the wall is back in Israel’s control, there is no need to wail. I had not heard this explanation before.



After he finished speaking, we each got a chance to walk down to the wall for a few minutes. Men must have their head covered and approach the wall on the left. Women do not have to be covered, and they go to the right.



I observed numerous individuals washing themselves for purification before going down to the wall to pray.



I went down to the wall placed my hand on it, though I do not believe there is any special connection to God in this place. I do however appreciate that some of these stones were present at the time of Jesus, and that is humbling to know that he was here (more on this below).



It was very crowded today with many, many men wearing their phylacteries, shawls, and tassels.

Once we joined back together, we walked to the southern end of the mount to an area known as the Southern Steps. This is a place I had not visited before and was probably my favorite thing I've seen so far on this trip.



As we approached the Southern Steps, Ami pointed out numerous excavations of mikvah, which were needed for purification before entering the temple.



The Southern Steps were the main way to access to Temple Mount in the time of Jesus, and there is no doubt that he walked on these rocks when he entered the temple (Mathew 21:12-17; Mark 11:11, 15-19, 27-22; 12:36-37; Luke 2:41-52; 19:45-48; John 2:13-22; 7:14-31; 8:2-11).



Ami talked about this a little and then Bruce got up and spoke. He mentioned the possibility that Peter's Acts 2 sermon might have been delivered from these steps, and that the mikvah were used to baptize the 3,000 on Pentecost.



It was an almost overwhelming feeling to be sitting on these steps, and I'm so glad we got to do it on this trip. It is also neat that Pentecost is on Sunday, just two days from now. On a side note, these steps would have been connected to the pilgrimage road that we saw later in the day.



We then moved back to the western side of the mount, and Ami began to explain which rocks were original to Herod's Temple Mount and which had been added later. This was always confusing to me, and today helped a lot. He explained that the lower, larger stones go all the way back to the time of Herod the Great. Most of these stones are "framed" with a depressed area around the outside of the stone. Up higher, smaller stones were added over the centuries by the Romans, the Muslims, the crusaders, and the Turks.



Further up the wall, he showed us the beginning of an arch that is sticking out from the wall known as Robinson's arch. Robinson was a Biblical scholar who identified this arch as being part of Herod's Temple Mount in 1838, when he connected this arch with a description given by Josephus of the temple area. Ami said that before excavations began in the area, the wall was buried all the way up to the arch.



Ami also pointed out piles of large rocks at the base of the wall that fell during the destruction of the temple in AD 70. This is unbelievable.

The City of David

Once we finished at the Western Wall, we walked out of the Dung Gate to the City of David. This is an archaeological park on the eastern side of the “Old City”, outside of the present-day walls. 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 Chron 11:4–9) before it was later expanded by King Hezekiah (2 Kings 18-20; 2 Chron 29-32).



As we went down into the site, we saw the excavated remains of a large building that has been excavated and dated to the time of David in the 11th to 10th century BC. It is presumed to be an administrative building for the Kings of Israel because they 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). Some have speculated that this was David’s palace, but there is no way to know whether this is the case.



Below this building is the “Royal Area” which contained a retaining wall from the Canaanite Period that supported the administrative building above. This was such a large wall that there was a house built in the middle of it.



Next, we entered a water system that is comprised of both the original Canaanite water system and Hezekiah’s water system. This water system is very cramped with lots of stairs, tunnels, and tight squeezes. I’ve got to give a big shout out to Olivia, who is extremely claustrophobic, but fought through and made it all the way to the end.



The first place we came to was “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. Warren thought this was part of the Canaanite water system and that David had used it to access the city of Jerusalem when he took it from the Jebusites (2 Sam 5:8). However, more recent excavations show this was not the case.



The actual Canaanite Water system consisted of a water reservoir from the 18th century BC that has been excavated.



This water reservoir was located next to the Spring of Gihon and protected by a nearby tower.



After the tower we saw 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. 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).



Sometime when I'm here, I really want to go through Hezekiah's Tunnel. Today, just like in 2020, we took the dry Canaanite tunnel to the outside. Olivia had a hard time with this part, but she made it!

Pool of Siloam / Pilgrimage Road



Our last stop in the City of David was at the Pool of Siloam where Jesus healed the blind man in John 9:7.



The group sat on the steps of this ancient pool, and I read from John 9.



I also talked to the group about the time when Jesus was in Jerusalem during the Feast of Tabernacles in John 7.



This is connected to the Pilgrimage Road that has been uncovered within the past few years. This road would have connected the Pool of Siloam with the Temple. 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 pitcher 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.' "*



It was awesome to visit this special place again with my family. It was my favorite site during my first trip in 2020. To know that Jesus performed a miracle at the Pool of Siloam, and that He likely walked this road many times. Just like with the Southern Steps, it is very humbling.

Church of Saint-Peter in Gallicantu



We left the City of David and boarded the bus for a short drive to Church of Saint-Peter in Gallicantu near Zion gate outside the city walls. This is a 19th Century French Catholic church built over a 5th century Byzantine shrine. The shrine was built because an ancient dungeon (pit) was found connected to a house that was dated to the first century AD. It was believed that the High Priest Caiaphas lived in this area, so it is traditionally considered to be his home and the pit where Jesus was held after being brought from the Garden of Gethsemane. It was while Jesus was appearing before Caiaphas that Peter denied Him three times (Matthew 26:57-75; Mark 14:53-72; Luke 22:54-62; John 18:12-27).



I had not been to this place before, so this was a new experience. We started off by going to the main sanctuary, which was very beautiful. Next, we went downstairs into a chapel that sits on top of the ancient Byzantine shrine.



In the chapel I read to the group from Luke 22 concerning Peter's denial, and then we proceed downstairs to see the pit.



We climbed down into this small pit and Daniel read to us from Psalm 88 for us to think about Jesus crying from the pit.

While our two morning stops were amazing, this is just a “traditional” place. The good thing about this site is that it really is an ancient dungeon and gives us an idea of what one would have looked like. It also takes your mind back to that night, and what Jesus went through before He gave up his life for us.

Mt. Zion Church / Tomb of David



Next drove a very short distance to Mt. Zion Church, which is just outside of Zion gate.



We didn't go inside the church building but did visit the traditional tomb of David that is located there. Just like with the Western Wall, this is a place of prayer and is divided between men and women.



We also visited the "Upper Room" built by German crusaders in the 12th century to commemorate the last supper of Jesus and his disciples. This was directly over the traditional tomb of David. While we were in this room, there was a group from Germany that was singing, and it was quite beautiful. I had not been to this site before either, and do not think there is a ton to be gained from visiting here.

Jewish Quarter



From Mt. Zion Church we walked over to the Old City and entered the Jewish Quarter through Zion gate.



We walked the streets for a few minutes before crossing the main plaza with the Haramban Synagogue.



Ami gave us some free time for a very late lunch and shopping. We ended up eating at a shawarma place, and it was good, though ordering was a bit hectic.



After lunch, Ami walked us over to see the Broad Wall, which is a piece of the wall that remains from the 1st temple period. It was excavated in 1970 and dated to the time of King Hezekiah in late 8th century BC. The length of wall fragment is 65 meters long and is preserved in places to a height of 3.3 meters. It is 7 feet thick. This was a substantial wall.



Next, we walked through the remains of the Byzantine Cardo (Heart of the City) from the 5th century AD. Finally, we walked along the edge of the Armenian quarter toward the Jafa gate where we exited the city and boarded the bus. After another short drive, we were back at the hotel for the night. Dinner was good, but I wasn't terribly hungry since our lunch had been so late. Anyway, it was another great day in Israel. Tomorrow, we start with the Mount of Olives and then head back into the Old City.

Day 9 - Mount of Olives, Pool of Bethesda, Holy Sepulchre, Garden Tomb (June 4, 2022)

I really felt like I hit a wall yesterday and was so super tired when I went to bed last night. Even though I slept well, I still felt exhausted when I woke up at 6:30am with Sara. Thankfully I caught my second wind later in the morning. Breakfast was a bit different since today is Sabbath. Very little hot food, as it had been prepared earlier. I found a wonderful cheese danish and ended up eating three of them. I also had three cups of coffee to try and give me a boost of energy.



We boarded the bus around 8:15am and headed to the Mount of Olives overlooking the Old City of Jerusalem. I had brought my travel tripod, and we quickly got the group together for a picture in front of the city. It was stressful trying to get it setup and use the remote trigger on my phone with so much activity going on around us. However, I'm really pleased with how it turned out. This is absolutely one of my favorite photos from the trip so far. This was when I got my second wind.

Mount of Olives



After our group picture, Ami took us down to a lower area on the for us to talk. ②The Mount of Olives is a ridge running along the east side of Jerusalem, separated from the city walls by a ravine and the Kidron Valley. The Kidron brook and valley are 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.).

Today the Mount of Olives is dotted with many churches, including the Church of All Nations, the Church of Mary Magdalene, and the Church of Dominus Flevit (we saw all these today).



It is also covered in Jewish tombs. Ami told us that this is the largest Jewish cemetery in the world. All the graves are above ground, and people leave small stones on them to simply say “I was here.” In the time of Jesus, this would have simply been a mountain filled with olive trees.

The Mount of Olives is very important in scripture, and was the site of many events:

- When David's son Absalom took control of Jerusalem, David and his loyal followers fled the city via an eastern route and David went up the Mount 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 Mount of Olives (Ezekiel 11:23).
- Jesus made many visits to the Mount of Olives (Luke 21:37). 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 Bethpage, 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 19:37).
- 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 (Matt 26:30–56; Mark 14:26–50; Luke 22:39–53).

- 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.

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).

Ami talked to us about the first temple period and then the second temple period built by Herod the Great who died in 4 AD. He also talked to us about the destruction of temple in AD 70, and all the groups that have rebuilt parts of the city over the centuries since that time.



The Muslims took over the city in the 7th century. Mohammad made a special trip from Mecca to the Temple Mount, and according to Islam, this is where he ascended into heaven. The Muslims built a shrine to commemorate this event, which is called “Dome of the Rock.” 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 Ishmael on Mt. Moriah. This is the most striking place in the skyline of Jerusalem.



Later the Muslims built the Al Aqsa Mosque also on the Temple Mount.



Ami also mentioned the Golden Gate (or Gate of Mercy / East Gate) that has been sealed since medieval times and is quite visible from the Mount of Olives.



After Ami finished speaking, I talked to the group about Jesus always coming to Bethany on the Mount of Olives, and then about the 3 major events that took place during the last week of His life in this place (listed above). I talked about how being there made it easier to understand how Jesus could have looked down on the city, and the Temple Mount, and lament over it during the triumphal entry. I also talked to them about how this was the location where He ascended to heaven after His resurrection. This is a special place. Next Daniel read to us from the account of the triumphal entry in Luke 19.



We had a little time to take some family pictures...



Even got one with Ami, our Israeli guide...



...and then I gathered the girls together and talked to them directly about the significance of this place as we overlooked Jerusalem. I told them that while it is not “Holy,” the events that took place here are among the most important events in history. That I why I say it is a special place. I did not know it at the time, but Tonya took a photo from behind us as we were talking. I’m thankful that she captured this moment. All in all, this was a great visit to the Mount of Olives, even more meaningful to me than last time. I’m so glad I got to share it with Olivia and the girls.



Next, we began to walk down the Palm Sunday Road toward the traditional location of the Garden of Gethsemane. I did not walk down this road last time, so this was a new experience. Along the way we saw a building that contained many ancient ossuaries (bone boxes) that were used to store the bones after the body had decayed in a tomb.



We also walked by the Church of Dominus Flevit that was designed by Antonio Belluchi to commemorate the tears of Jesus when he prayed in the garden. It is shaped like a tear drop.

Gethsemane



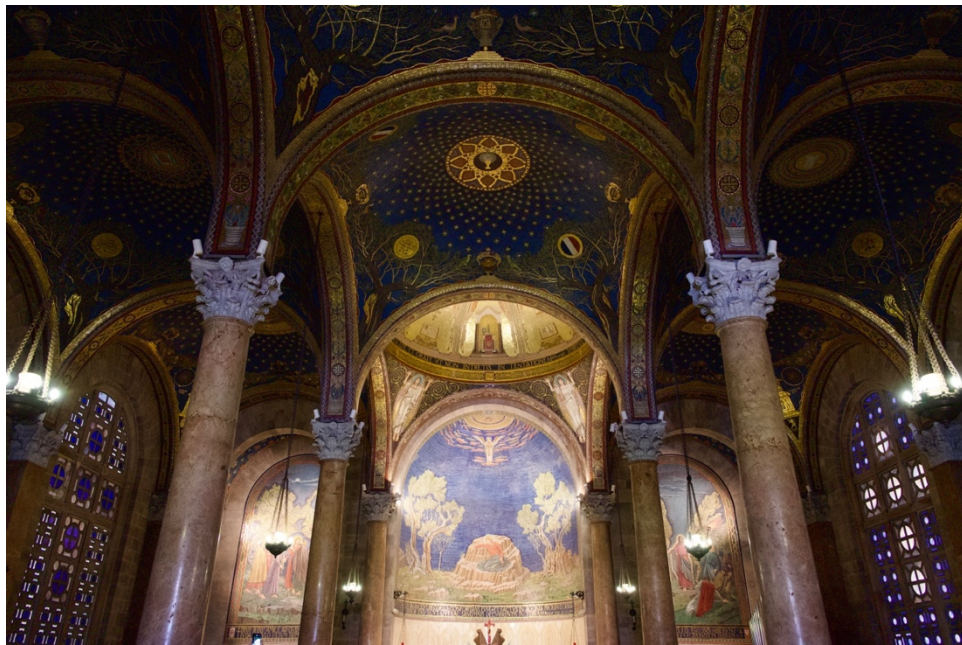
At the end of Palm Sunday Road, we reached the traditional location of the mount of Olives.



It 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.



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).



I learned something new this time that even the U.S. contributed to this structure, and you can see an eagle at the top of one of the domes inside. While we were inside, there was a service going on in Portuguese, which is neat since Jana Palk is a native of Brazil where they speak Portuguese, and her husband Daniel was a missionary there for many years.



After leaving the church, we walked across the street to the bus, and I was able to get a really good view of the Valley of Kidron that is mentioned above.

“Old City” of Jerusalem



After getting back on the bus, we made the short drive over to Herod's Gate (Flower Gate) in the Old City of Jerusalem.



We entered the city through this gate into the Muslim Quarter.



This is probably my favorite quarter to walk around in because of all the shops selling all kinds of different things. However, it is very crowded, so can be a bit stressful.

Pool of Bethesda / Church of St. Anne

We walked over toward the Lion's Gate to our first stop, which was the Pool of Bethesda. This was excavated in the 19th century and was the site of Jesus healing the invalid in John 5:1-17. John gives details about Bethesda that it was near the "sheep gate" and had a "five roofed colonnade. This would have placed it north of the temple and outside the city walls during the time of Jesus.



When we first arrived at the pool, I read to the group from the account of Jesus healing the lame man in John 5, and then Ami talked about the site. On my first trip, I found the ruins to be very confusing, but after Ami's explanation, it makes a lot more sense. Bethesda was two pools (North / South) and in between those are the remains of two different churches that have been built on the same site over the centuries.



I was able to clearly see south pool from our first vantage point.



I walked to the north side and was also able to clearly make out the northern pool.



Right next to Bethesda is the Church of Saint Anne. This is a French Roman Catholic Church, and much of the current structure dates to the 12th century AD. Under this building is one of the traditional birthplaces of the virgin Mary (Anne was supposedly her mother). However, St. Anne's is most known for its beautiful acoustics.



Our group entered St. Anne's and Derek led us in a few hymns. We started with "It is Well With My Soul," which is my favorite Hymn, and it sounded unbelievable. It was very moving.

Convent of Sisters of Zion

Our group exited St. Anne's and again navigated the streets of Jerusalem to the Convent of sisters of Zion. This was a new place for me, and the significance lies in what is underneath the convent.



As we went down into the site, beneath the level of the current city, the first thing that we saw was a cistern that had been cut out of the moat that surrounded the ancient Fortress Antonio. This fortress was built by Herod the Great and was intended to help prevent uprising in the city of Jerusalem. This was likely the location where Jesus appeared before Pilate (Matthew 27:1-16; Mark 15:1-15; Luke 23:1-25; John 18:28-19:22), since Pilate almost certainly would have come to this place when in Jerusalem. It is also likely this is the place referred to as the "barracks" in Acts 21:37 where Paul was taken after his arrest in the temple. Paul would have been held here until he was moved to Caesarea in Acts 23:23. It was on the steps of the barracks that Paul made his defense before the Jews in Acts 22:1-21.



Next, we saw pavement stones from the streets of Jerusalem in the 1st century AD that have not been restored.



It was at this spot that Mike Johns read to us from Luke 23 about Jesus' trial, and then I spoke to the group about Paul's imprisonment at the Fortress Antonia.



This was awesome, and I'm glad I got to see it.

Via Dolorosa / The Way of the Cross

Back out on the street, I accepted an English translation of the Quran from a Muslim “evangelist” who stopped me. Ami seemed surprised that they were openly recruiting.



Very soon we began to see the signs for the Via Dolorosa. This is the traditional path that Jesus took, forced by the Roman soldiers, on the way to his crucifixion.



Before we began to see the actual stations of the cross, we stopped at the Basti Restaurant for lunch. We sat with our friend and neighbor Bonnie and enjoyed a delicious meal. Olivia and I had chicken shawarma and the girls had pizza.



We all had a lemon drink that had ice and mint. All of this was wonderful and was probably the best meal I've had in Israel.



After lunch, we began to again work our way through the Muslim Quarter and the stations of the cross on the Via Dolorosa.



☐The winding route goes from the approximate location of the former Antonia Fortress to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre — about 2,000 feet. The current route has been established since the 18th century, replacing various earlier versions.



It is today marked by nine Stations of the Cross in the city and five more inside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.



We didn't go to the Church of the Flagellation and the Chapel of Condemnation, but these mark the beginning of the Via Dolorosa, and are the location of the first two stations. I saw these the last time I was in Jerusalem, and didn't really feel the need to go there again. The 14 steps that are included in the "Way of the Cross" to show the way of Jesus from his trial to burial (Matt 27: Mark 15; Luke 23; John 18:28–19:42). 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. Also, not all these steps depict things that appear in scripture.



Ami took us through the Muslim Quarter and pointed out several stations to us as we wound our way through the market.

Church of the Holy Sepulchre



The Via Dolorosa took us into the Christian Quarter and ended at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. We did not initially go in through the main entrance, but instead went in via the roof that is in the area for the Ethiopian Orthodox. Just inside the roof entrance, Ami pointed out a painting of the Queen of Sheba who came to meet Solomon in 1 Kings 10:1-11. Ami said that this event along with Philip's conversion of the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8:26-39, tie Ethiopia to the Jewish / Christian world.



After moving through this area, we came out by the main entrance, and Ami told us more about the structure. It 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). This site is incredibly ornate with lots of gold and mosaics covering the walls and the traditional spots.

This site is shared by multiple denominations who each have their own areas of the structure. The groups include Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox and Armenian Apostolic, and to a lesser degree the Coptic Orthodox, Syriac Orthodox and Ethiopian Orthodox. The Status Quo, an understanding between religious communities dating to 1757, applies to the site.



As an example of Status Quo, there is 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.



We re-entered the building, and then immediately went upstairs to the right to the traditional place for Golgotha.



There was a line of people waiting to touch and kiss the spot, which is very ornately decorated, and the rock that is supposed to be Golgotha is under glass.



Next, we went back downstairs to see the slab where tradition says that Jesus' body was laid to prepare it for burial. People come and place token on this slab and then touch it and kiss it. Behind the slab are beautiful mosaics depicting:



Jesus being taken down from the cross...



Jesus' body being prepared for burial...



Jesus being placed in the tomb...



In the main chamber is the traditional tomb, and it is enclosed by a 19th-century shrine called the Aedicula. The line for this was much shorter than the last time I was here, but I still did not try to go in.



Up above the Aedicula is a majestic cupola with a circular glass top that allows the sunlight to shine through.



The last thing of note that we saw was one of the very few spots that is not ornamental in any way and is just off from the main chamber. It is a first century tomb and gives a good perspective on what tombs of that time looked like.

While I enjoy taking pictures at this place, I do not buy into the tradition, and it seems to be very much the opposite of what Jesus was about with all the elaborate ornamentation. Also, archaeology cannot prove the location where Jesus was buried, but this leaves room for faith. 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).

From the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, we briefly stopped by a shop in the Christian Quarter for a break and to allow people to browse.



We then went back into the Muslim Quarter and again navigated the market.



We stopped at a spice shop along the way, and several from our group purchased some spices.



Finally, we left the city through the very busy Damascus Gate. Even though it was busy, it was not nearly as busy as the last time I was here.



Outside the Gate, Ami pointed that this 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 AD. From the Damascus Gate, we took a short walk to the Garden Tomb.

The Garden Tomb

Our final stop today was at the Garden Tomb. After the craziness of the Muslim Quarter, it was nice to spend a few minutes in this peaceful place.

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 the tomb under the Church of the Holy Sepulchre 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 Sepulchre would have been outside the walls of Jerusalem as they stood in the time of Jesus.



A local guide named Philip took over and led us through the site. He said that he was born and raised in Jerusalem (His English was flawless), and that he was not there to try and convince us that this is the actual tomb of Jesus. He said that whether 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.



He led us through to the place and showed us the rock that was identified as Golgotha, because it vaguely resembles a skull.



He took us to the garden and explained that they believe that a garden was in the location even back in ancient times. The apostle John identified that the tomb of Jesus was near a garden. He said that in antiquity a garden did not mean flowers, but instead an agriculture garden. They have found the lower part (vat) of an ancient winepress just beside the tomb, so they know it was a garden.



Finally, we came to the tomb. As we were waiting to enter, I asked Philip some questions about the tomb, specifically about the cross that is painted on the inside (I saw this in 2020), and what changes were made to the site by the crusaders. He said that the Byzantines had turned this site into a church in the 5th century AD, and that they had painted the cross on the tomb. In the time of the crusades, they converted the whole area into a donkey pen. The door to the tomb was enlarged to allow the donkeys to enter, and the channel in front where the stone would have been was enlarged to make a feeding trough. I found this ironic, because they essentially turned the channel into a manger, which is where Jesus was placed when he was born. I found this all very interesting.



After waiting a few minutes, all four of us entered the tomb together, and talked a bit about what we were seeing. The tomb was built for three people, so there are three slabs inside.

After leaving the site, we took a short bus ride back to the hotel and then were able to rest and clean up before having a nice dinner in the main dining room. Tomorrow is the Pentecost holiday, so we will not be able to go into the Old City. Instead, we are planning on the Israel Museum, Herodium, and Bethlehem.

This has been a much better experience in Jerusalem than on my last trip. I think that last time I didn't really know what to expect and found myself disappointed with all the "traditional" sites, and the over-the-top ornamentation. Now with experience I know what to expect, and our slower pace this time has allowed me to see around the traditional and appreciate those things that really do date back to Biblical times. I'm sure that having my family with me also makes a big difference.

Day 10 - Israel Museum, Herodium, Shepherd's Field (June 5, 2022)

I snoozed a bit this morning until 6:40am, and the Sara and I quickly got ready to meet Olivia and Sara for breakfast.



In the dining room I ran into Murad who was our guide on my last trip to Israel. We ran into him again later at the Israel Museum. It was good to see him.

For Breakfast, we had hot food again now that sabbath is over. I combined some eggs with three more cheese Danishes. I never eat like this at home!



We boarded the bus around 8:15am for a short drive to the modern city of Jerusalem. Today is Shavuot, which is Pentecost of the Feast of Weeks. The streets were pretty quiet because of the holiday, but we could see many Orthodox Jews heading to the Western Wall.

Model of Jerusalem / Israel Museum



Our first stop today was at the Israel Museum to see the Jerusalem Model and the Shrine of the Book.



The Jerusalem Model is a 1:50 scale model of the city of Jerusalem in the late Second Temple period (~AD 66). The model measures 22,000 sq ft, and was commissioned in 1966 by the banker Hans Kroch, the owner of the Holyland Hotel, in memory of his son, Yaakov, an IDF soldier who was killed in the 1947–1949 Palestine war. It was designed by Israeli historian and geographer Michael Avi-Yonah based on the writings of Flavius Josephus and other historical sources. The model includes a replica of the Herodian Temple. From 1974, Yoram Tsafrir (1938-2015) superintended the Holyland Model of Jerusalem.

In 2006, the model was relocated to the southern edge of the Billy Rose Sculpture Garden at the Israel Museum. In preparation for the move, the model was sawn into 100 pieces and later reassembled. The Holyland Hotel spent \$3.5 million on the move.

Ami took us around the entire model and told us about various places within the city. He explained how there were three walls around Jerusalem just before its destruction in AD 70. In the time of Jesus, only two of these walls would have been completed. The outer wall, or third wall, was started by Herod Agrippa I, and finished by his son Herod Agrippa II. This is important in considering where Jesus might have been crucified and buried since we know it was outside the city walls. The following are a few highlights of this magnificent model:



The temple and temple mount on the eastern side of Jerusalem. This would be the view from the Mount of Olives looking over the Kidron valley. Royal Portico on the left with the red rood, the temple with the Most Holy Place is in the middle, and the Fortress Antonia in the upper-right. The gate “Beautiful” is in the front of the temple (Eastern side), and it divided the court of the Gentiles from the Court of the Women. Solomon’s portico would be the colonnade on the eastern side of the temple mount.



Pool of Siloam (right-hand side) and “Pilgrimage Road” leading up to the temple on the southern side



The Southern Steps that were the primary route into the Temple Mount



The western side of the city and temple. The pile of stones just outside the second wall (left-center) is at the location of the modern Church of the Holy Sepulchre.



Another pile of rocks representing the location of the Garden Tomb, which is also outside of the second wall. This is northwest of the temple.



The Pool of Bethesda, just north of the temple.



Western Wall and Robinson's Arch (note the red arrow that shows where the Western Wall is today). This is the southwest corner of the Temple Mount.



This model is amazing and is such a helpful tool in teaching. I took extensive photographs here in January 2020, but it was overcast and rainy. Today was a nice, sunny day, so I was glad to get a new set of photographs to use in classes and sermons.



From the model, we went to the Scroll of the Book, which is a shrine commemorating the Dead Sea Scrolls. No pictures are allowed inside so I will just address some of the highlights.



The outside of the shrine was designed to look like the top of one of the jars in which the Dead Sea Scrolls were found. Just inside Ami showed us several artifacts that have been discovered from the Essenes in Qumran. This includes:

- A sun dial that they used to keep track of the days so they could keep the Jewish laws
- Pieces of phylactery covers that were found in cave 4. Even today, a phylactery is worn on the forehead between the eyes and contains a copy of the Shema
- Several examples of plates and pottery
- Some of the jars that contained the scroll fragments

Inside the main part of the shrine, we were able to see a fragment of the book of Isaiah that was found in Cave 1. This fragment is of Isaiah 40:3-4

Isaiah 40:3–4 (ESV) ³ *A voice cries: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.*

In the middle of the main room there is a complete facsimile of the scroll of Isaiah that was found at Qumran. The handwriting on these scrolls is unbelievable.



As we were walking out, Ami was talking about the scroll of the temple that was found at Qumran. He mentioned that to him the temple is now in your heart. He also added that if they found the ark of the covenant, he might change his mind. I thought this was funny.

Herodium



After our visit at the museum, we loaded the bus and headed south into the West Bank to Herodium. Herodium was the administrative center for Herod the Great. It is located 7.5 miles south of Jerusalem and 3.1 miles southeast of Bethlehem. The site is a large, man-made hill that looks like a volcano. It also looks very much like an archaeological Tel, but it was built by Herod the Great between 23 and 15 B.C. The mountain is 2,487 feet above sea level, which is the highest peak in the Judean wilderness.

On our last trip, they were working on a large stone staircase to the top of the hill and on the restoration of the theatre. Well, Ami told me that today instead of going up to the top of Herodium using the normal trail, we would instead be going up the new staircase after watching a presentation in the Royal Guest Room above the restored theater.



We began by watching a very dramatized short movie and then walking down a level road toward the theater. Quickly the palace at the bottom of the hill came into view. It contained a giant freshwater swimming pool surrounded by columns.



We next arrived at the restored theater and climbed to the top to the remains of the Royal Guest Room. There are a few original stone steps remaining near the top, but most of this has been completely restored. This was a big theme at Herodium today.



The exterior building for the Royal Guest Room is new, but inside are plaster and frescoes from the original structure. Inside here, we watched a short presentation with a story about this room being built for Marcus Agrippa. I doubt this is based on any reliable source.



Next, we went up to the presumed tomb of Herod the Great that was discovered in 2007. There are no markings or inscriptions, but Josephus said that Herod was buried here, so it makes sense that this very large tomb was for him. This also looked dramatically different than two years ago as they are in the middle of a large restoration process.



After leaving the tomb, we began to climb the steep new steps to the top of the hill. These were in the process of being built during our last trip, and now go all the way to the top. All of this has been restored.



At the top of Herodium was a fortress-palace that is also in the process of being restored. This is confusing to me, because the original excavations are so magnificent, I don't understand why they would want to taint them with new construction.



Anyway, In the second century AD, Herodium was occupied by the Jews during the second Jewish revolt. They converted Herod's reception hall into a synagogue. They also built mikvah on top of Herodium, though we couldn't see them because of the construction.



We then walked around the edge of the top and took in the beautiful views of the Mountains and wilderness of Judea. You can see all the way to the Dead Sea from the top of Herodium.



As we came back into the fortress we walked through the bathhouse before walking out through the water system.



What remains of the water system at Herodium was partially built by Herod and partially built by the Jewish zealots in the 2nd revolt.



This system was designed to bring in water via aqueducts and store it in large cisterns. Olivia was again very brave and made it all the way through even though she is very claustrophobic.



On a side note, a signet ring (bulla) of Pontius Pilate was found at Herodium. The original is in a museum, but we were able to see a reproduction.



After leaving Herodium, we made short drive to Beit Sahour for lunch, which was at the Ruth Restaurant. We ate here on our last trip as well.



This time we all four had chicken shawarma, and it was quite tasty.



The windows of the restaurant had images from Christmas like a snowman, Christmas tree, bells, and Santa Claus. No idea what that is about.

Shepherd's Field



After lunch we walked over this Shepherd's Field. This is a site that contains 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). It is just southeast of Bethlehem in the West Bank. While we don't know where those shepherds lived, this cave is a good example of the type of natural caves in the area, and where Jesus was likely born in nearby Bethlehem. This same site is also traditionally identified Boaz's field mentioned in Ruth 2:2, where Ruth gleaned grain for herself and Naomi



We were able to have our worship service for the day in this cave, which made it a lot more meaningful. Derek led us in the hymn “Tell Me the Story of Jesus,” and then Daniel gave us a lesson based on the things we have seen on our trip to this point. After communion, I got up and spoke about how even though we don’t know where the shepherds really were, this place reminds me that the message of Jesus came first to lower class people instead of priests or kings in the upper class. Jesus is not just for those with a status here on earth, He is for everyone. After I finished speaking, Bruce said a few words of thanks to the group before offering a prayer.



After finishing our service, we made a quick stop to look at the Shepherd’s Field Chapel at the site that was built in 1953 by the Franciscans.

Shopping in Bethlehem



Our final stop of the day was at Tabash Jewelry and Souvenirs in Bethlehem for shopping. I had been here before and had met the owner, Edward Tabash. This time we were greeted by his son Richard who gave us a brief presentation before turning us loose. I didn't really buy anything for myself but got both Kate and Sara a "widow's mite" necklace that contains a real first century Jewish mite. I bought the same thing for Olivia on my first trip and wanted them to have one to remember their first trip to Israel.



I was able to talk some with Richard and asked about how his dad Edward was doing. Richard said that Edward had been in the hospital for 21 days and will be having open heart surgery next Tuesday. I told him that we would keep him in our prayers. I introduced him to my family and told him that this was their first trip. He very generously gave each of them an olive wood bracelet that contains Jerusalem Crosses.



After we finished shopping, it took a while to get back through the checkpoint at the edge of the West Bank, but once we did, we headed straight back to the hotel. The route back gave us a quick glance of the Valley of Gehenna (Hinnom) on the way back. This valley is on the west and southwest side of Jerusalem. Hinnom is first mentioned in the Bible as part of the border between the tribes of Judah and Benjamin (Joshua 15:8). During the late First Temple period, it was the site of the Topheth, where some of the kings of Judah had sacrificed their children by fire (Jeremiah 7:31). After this, it was cursed by the prophet Jeremiah (Jeremiah 19:2–6).

Old City of Jerusalem

Back at the hotel, we spent some time cleaning up and packing before heading to dinner. After dinner, we did something a bit different.



We walked down to the Old City and went from Herod's Gate all the way around to Jaffa Gate. Near Jaffa Gate, many orthodox Jewish families were leaving the city as the Pentecost holiday was just ending.



We went in through the Jaffa Gate and walked around the Jewish Quarter for a few minutes before heading back to our hotel. This is our last night in Jerusalem, and late tomorrow night we hopefully board our flight back to the US. Before our flight we are driving back up to the north to some of the sites we missed on day one when we missed our flight. This includes two of my favorites, Caesarea Maritima and Tel Megiddo. Should be a great last day.

Days 11-12 - Caesarea Maritima, Jezreel Valley, Tel Megiddo, Jaffa, Travel Home (June 6-7, 2022)

Today was our last day in Israel and I got up at 5:45am this morning to get ready and finish packing. We had to be done with breakfast early to take a COVID test at 7:30am for our return flight to the United States.



After the COVID test we boarded the bus for a long ride to the northern coast and Caesarea Maritima. This was a site we were supposed to see on our first day that was missed but Ami was able to rearrange our schedule so that we could fit it in today along with Tel Megiddo.

Caesarea Maritima



Upon arrival at the site, Ami began to tell us about the city of Caesarea. “Maritima” means “by the sea” (port city on the Mediterranean). It is known simply as “Caesarea” in scripture and is not to be confused with Caesarea Philippi in the Galilean Peninsula that we visited last week.

The city was built by Herod the Great between approximately 22 and 10 B.C. and was named for Caesar Augustus. Herod built it to serve the needs of the Roman Empire, because it did not have a major harbor in Israel.

Ami talked about what a massive project this was to build a port here, because there is not a natural bay. Herod used huge blocks of sandstone assembled with lead to build the harbor. At its peak, Caesarea had a population of over 100,000 people.

The synagogue at Caesarea was also where the Jewish revolt against the Romans began in 66 A.D.

After Roman time, the site was further transformed by the Byzantines in the 5th century, the Turks in the 8th century, and then the crusaders in the 10th to 11th centuries.

Among many other reasons, the ruins at Caesarea are 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 (we know it as the grid system). It shows that Romans planned out their cities in detail before starting to build. This style was invented by the architect Hippodamus of Miletus.

They are also important because of the role that Caesarea plays in the books 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.
- 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).



Our first stop in the city was the magnificent theater built by Herod and the many marble statues standing just outside.



Caesarea was full of marble sculptures, as was typical of Roman cities of the time. All of them are headless today as they were beheaded by Muslims because Islam does not allow icons.



One of the statues that Ami showed us was of a little shepherd from the Byzantine period.

There is no marble in Israel, so all of this had to be imported from other parts of the Roman Empire to build the statues and columns. They also imported other materials such as granite.



Next, we went inside the theater that was built out of sandstone. The base of this theater is original, but the seats have all been restored with concrete to allow for modern-day concerts. It is frustrating that so much restoration is taking place at these sites. They were working on the theater when I first came to Caesarea, and they are still working on it.



I learned something from Ami about ancient theaters that I did not already know. He said that the entrance/exit tunnels were called “vomitoriums” (where we get our word vomit) because they “spit out” the crowd from the theater. Fascinating and gross all at the same time.



In the theater, Ami continued to talk to us about the history of Caesarea, and about its role in the story of Cornelius and of Paul's imprisonment. Once Ami finished, I spent a few minutes talking to the group about the other mentions of Caesarea in the books of Acts and how being at this site can really enhance our ability to picture the events in scripture.



Back outside of the theater, Ami showed us several column fragments and a sarcophagus that were found at Caesarea. These have different symbols on them depending on what period they are from. For example, those with a cross are from the Byzantine period.



As we approached the palace of Herod the Great, Bruce told the group about a time he had been to Caesarea with Dr. Marlin Connelly.



He said that while the group was touring the palace, he looked out onto the rock by the shore and saw Dr. Connelly talking with some of the local fisherman. He got emotional as he told this story as we lost Dr. Connelly in 2020. Dr. Connelly was my mentor in preaching, and while I had heard the story before, I was glad that Bruce shared it with the group. It was easy to picture him out there on the rocks.



At the palace, Ami showed us the replica of the inscription that was found at Caesarea mentioning Pontius Pilate. The palace at Caesarea was likely used by Pontius Pilate while he was a Roman Governor in Israel. The inscription reads, "Pontius Pilate, the prefect of of Judea, erected a building dedicated to the emperor Tiberius."



Also at the palace, Ami showed us the swimming pool of Herod that can still be clearly seen out in the Mediterranean and is still surrounded by beautiful mosaics.



In addition to the ruins at Caesarea, the view of the Mediterranean from this place is incredible.



In the upper part of the palace, Ami talked to us again about Paul being imprisoned here for two years. It was specifically mentioned in Acts 23:35 that Paul was being held in Herod's palace.



Next, we walked over to the magnificent hippodrome, which is from the late Roman period.



The hippodrome was an amphitheater as it was a complete oval and was used for games and sport rather. The side of the hippodrome near the Mediterranean has been completely consumed by the sea.



Next to the hippodrome is a public toilet like the one we saw in Bet-She'an. This time I decided to try one out (not really).

Before heading to the next area in Caesarea, we took a short break to allow the group to go down to the Mediterranean.



My family reached down and put our hands in the water.



I also tried to get a picture of my foot touching the water, and just like two years ago, the water went over the top of my waterproof shoe. Squish, squish, squish.



From here, we headed north along to the coast into another set of ruins. We did not visit this next part on my previous trip, so I was excited to learn about these areas. Ami showed us an example of a Roman Arch. With this type of arch, the center keystone is larger on the top than the bottom, which allows all subsequent stones to form the arch.



Up above this area we saw the remains of a magnificent bath house with marble columns from the late Roman period.



We then saw a late Roman period house with beautiful mosaic floors.



Next we went through a district believed to be from the Byzantine period, which also had some beautiful mosaics, though many of these had been damaged by earthquakes.



Above the Byzantine area is a Crusader period fortress with a large moat.



Beyond the fortress we saw the location of the harbor at Caesarea. Even though the only remaining ruins are under water, I loved seeing where it used to be located. As I was looking at the sea, I was imagining Paul embarking or disembarking here when fleeing to Tarsus, or after his missionary journeys, or on his voyage to Rome as a prisoner. I'm so glad I got to see this.



On the way out we exited through the remains of a Crusader period gate.



The route through this gate is shaped like an L, which Ami said was to slow down horses trying to make it through.



After leaving the gate, we boarded the bus for a short drive up the coast to see the remains of Herod's aqueduct for 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 8 miles 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.



Ami said that they have found three pipes on top of this structure made from ceramic. He also said that they have found inscriptions at the aqueduct from unit 10 of the Roman Army.



It is believed that this is the same unit that destroyed Jerusalem, and the assumption is that Herod had soldiers doing construction and maintenance work when they were not in battle.

Jezreel Valley



After Caesarea, we loaded the bus to head for Tel Megiddo. Even though we didn't make a specific stop for the Jezreel Valley, Megiddo is right on the edge of this important area, and we were able to see it from the bus and from on top of Megiddo.

The valley is south of Galilee and north of the hill country of Ephraim. Deborah and Barak defeated the Canaanites in the Jezreel Valley (Judges 4–5). Gideon fought and defeated the Midianites on a hill in this valley with just 300 men (Judges 6–7). Saul camped at the spring of Jezreel before his final battle with the Philistines and his death on Mount Gilboa (1 Samuel 31).



While on top of Tel Megiddo, we were able to see Mount Tabor across the valley, which is a traditional location for the transfiguration of Jesus (Matt 17:1; Mark 9:2; Luke 9:28). This spot was part of our original itinerary, but it had to be removed after missing our first day due to travel problems.



We were also able to see Mount Gilboa across the valley, which is the place where Saul and Jonathan died in I Samuel 31.

Tel Megiddo



When we first arrived at Tel Megiddo, we watched a short movie about the site and then had lunch. We ate at a table with Bonnie, Sue, and Emily, and the meal was delicious. After lunch, we received word that all of us had tested negative on our COVID tests, which was a relief.



For our tour of Megiddo, we started working up the trail to the top of the Tel, and Ami told us a little about the history of Megiddo that encompasses both the Canaanite and Israelite periods.

Megiddo is a fortress city that dates 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, an ancient trade route linking Egypt with the northern empires of Syria, Anatolia, and 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 was destroyed 30 times by waves of conquerors, and this has resulted in 30 levels or strata that comprise the Tel.

In scripture, Megiddo is referenced 12 times in the Old Testament.

- Megiddo is mentioned among the cities conquered by Joshua (Josh 12:21) - 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).
- According to tradition this will be the site of Armageddon as described in Revelation 16 (Most likely this association is symbolic)



As we climbed up the trail, Ami showed us an ancient staircase from the Canaanite period before the children of Israel took the promised land).



Next we say the main gate from the Canaanite period. This has been dated to approximately the 16th century B.C. This means that it is 3500 years old, and it was the only way in and out of city.



The gate had multiple rooms on either side of it, and Ami said this was for the collection of taxes from those who entered the city.



Further up the site, on a different stratum, there is a partially restored gate from 10th century B.C. (approximate time of Solomon). When I was here two years ago, this gate was partially destroyed getting to the lower gate from the 16th century, which is one of the major challenges of archaeology. A lot of restoration had been done in 2 years.



The next thing we saw were the remains of the Northern Palace and Stable. Most agree that this is from the Israelite period, but scholars are quite divided about whether this was from Solomon's time (10th century BC) or Ahab's time (9th century BC).

From here, Ami took us up to the top of the Tel and talked to us about the Jezreel Valley, which spread out below us.



In addition to the things I described above, we were also able to see the modern day city of Nazareth across the valley as well as Mt. Carmel, which is northwest of Megiddo.



Mt. Carmel is the location where Elijah defeated the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings 18:20-40.



I talked to the group about my belief that John's use of "Armageddon" was Revelations was not intended to mean that the final battle would physically take place at Megiddo but was used metaphorically because there were so many battles that took place at this site (Ami had earlier said something similar). I also read from 2 Kings 23 which mentions that King Josiah died at Megiddo.



At the top of the tel, Ami pointed out how it was easy to see all the different strata at Megiddo.



He also showed us the remains of a Canaanite period altar.



We then walked to the southern end of the site and saw a grain Silo from the late Israelite period. It is estimated to be from the time of Jeroboam II (8th century B.C.)



We then saw the southern stables, which have mostly been reconstructed and are estimated to be from the 9th Century B.C. (Time of Ahab)



Our final stop was the water system from the 9th Century BC. 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.



We got to walk down and through this tunnel to the spring that is still there today. Ami let me go first so I could make a recording of the entire system for showing to future Bible classes.



Olivia made it through this water system as well. Before our trip I didn't think she would try any of them but ended making it through all of them.



From the top you can still see the original steps going down the hill near where the modern steps are. Down in the tunnel, it is quote cool, which felt nice on a very hot day.

After finishing up at Megiddo, we boarded the bus and began making the long drive to Jaffa for our farewell dinner.

Jaffa (Joppa) for Dinner

Present day Jaffa is in the same location as the Joppa mentioned in the New Testament in Acts 10. Peter was staying in Joppa with Simon the tanner when he had the vision of the animals coming down on a sheet while on the roof. That was at the same time as Cornelius had sent messengers to Joppa to bring Peter back to Caesarea.



There are no ruins from Peter's time in Jaffa today, but it was still nice to visit the location right on the Mediterranean.



Our dinner was at St. George Restaurant, and it was delicious. After dinner we thanked Ami and Jamil for a wonderful trip as they guided us through the Holy Land.



Just as we were leaving, I was able to snap a quick shot with my phone through bus window of a beautiful sunset between two buildings.

Travel Home



After dinner, we made the short drive to the Ben Guiron airport for our return flight.



We again had a snafu with our tickets and had to wait for a long time at the American Airlines customer service counter for them to get things straightened out. Even with the hassle, we still all made it on the flight.



Our flight from Tel Aviv to Miami left just before midnight. It was long flight (Almost 7,000 miles in 13 hours), but relatively uneventful other than a lot of very unhappy kids. I probably slept for 5 or 6 hours of the flight, but I'm pretty sure Sara only slept for about an hour. I'm expecting her to completely collapse when we get home.

We landed in Miami just after 5:30am, so we only moved forward in time 5 1/2 hours on a 13-hours flight. Flying across the Atlantic always messes with my brain regarding time.

