

# *Israel: A Visit to The Holy Land*



*April 2014*

*Bob and Molly Hillery*

## Travel to the Holy Land.

Easter Sunday had been a beautiful day in Cincinnati and everyone in church was dressed in their spring finery for the morning service. This combined with a lovely dinner with Elizabeth and family on their screened porch - and a phone call from Christopher in California - seemed to set the stage beautifully for our twelve day trip to Israel which began on Monday afternoon.

We had an overnight flight to Paris, a three hour layover there, and then the final four hour flight to Tel Aviv and our first glimpse of this country - at least from within its borders. We had been only a few feet away from Israel as we visited the Jesus Baptism site on the banks of the River Jordan when we were in Jordan several years ago but now we were truly in the Holy Land proper. It is difficult to describe the anticipation of all that we expected to see in the next twelve days.

We were not disappointed.

# *Israel, April 2014.*

## *Travel to the Holy Land.*

### **Monday April 21**

We left home a little before 2pm and had a last coffee at Starbucks before our 11 week absence to Israel, England and Russia. We drove to the airport and were soon checked in and through Security and had time for a visit to the Sky Club lounge before our 5:45 flight to Paris.

The flight left on time, we had a good meal on board and arrived at Paris-Charles de Gaulle on time at 8 on Tuesday morning.

### **Tuesday April 22**

We were soon through the security check on entering the terminal and went straight to the Air France lounge where we stayed for much of the three hour layover time. Then it was on to our 10:55 Air France flight to Tel Aviv and the start of our twelve day visit to Israel. This flight took a little over four hours and also included a fairly substantial meal and a glass of wine. It was partly cloudy most of the way so we were not able to see much of the terrain, except the somewhat barren land of western Turkey, a little of Cyprus and then the short stretch of the Mediterranean before we were over Israel. At this point we were told to remain in our seats until we were at the gate at Tel Aviv – not unlike the situation flying into Salt Lake City for the Winter Olympics of 2002, following the events of the previous September 11.

Other than that, the landing at Ben Gurion airport was uneventful as was the immigration and customs process so, after wrestling with the ATM machines for a few minutes, we were on our way by taxi to our hotel in Jerusalem.

The drive was on a fast motorway and was through much cultivated (and irrigated) desert-like land (vineyards and fruit and vegetable farms) all the way to the outskirts of the city. Our driver pointed out that we were climbing steadily for the last 20 kilometers into Jerusalem, which sits at one of the highest points before the land plunges rather more precipitously towards the Dead Sea.

We checked into the Dan Panorama hotel soon after 6pm and, after unpacking and cleaning up, we walked about 20 minutes to a “local” restaurant recommended at the front desk. It was indeed local in flavor (we had an Israeli salad and several small dishes to share) and was perhaps a little sparse on décor but nevertheless a good introduction to the food (and wine) of the country.

We walked back to the hotel after dark on some sparsely populated streets but felt no concern for our safety or at all ill-at-ease in our new surroundings.



### **Wednesday April 23**

We were up rather late (almost 9am) but were in time to enjoy the buffet breakfast in the hotel. This was not dissimilar to many other buffet breakfasts we have experienced but, of course, there was no bacon! Otherwise it was quite expansive and certainly satisfied our needs.

We then walked the 15 minutes or so from our hotel to the Jaffa Gate, one of several entrances to the Old City.

***Our first view of the walls around the Old City in Jerusalem***





*Above: A closer view of the City Walls and the Tower of David*

*Right: The Jaffa gate, through which we entered the Old City*



The **Tower of David** is an ancient citadel located near the **Jaffa Gate** entrance to the Old City of Jerusalem.

Built to strengthen a strategically weak point in the Old City's defenses, the citadel that stands today has foundations constructed during the 2nd century BC. The tower has been destroyed and rebuilt by successive conquerors of Jerusalem. It was named by Byzantine Christians who believed it to be the site of the palace of King David. Today it contains a museum with important archaeological finds dating back 2,700 years.



*Trying not to get side-tracked on our way through the Christian Quarter!*

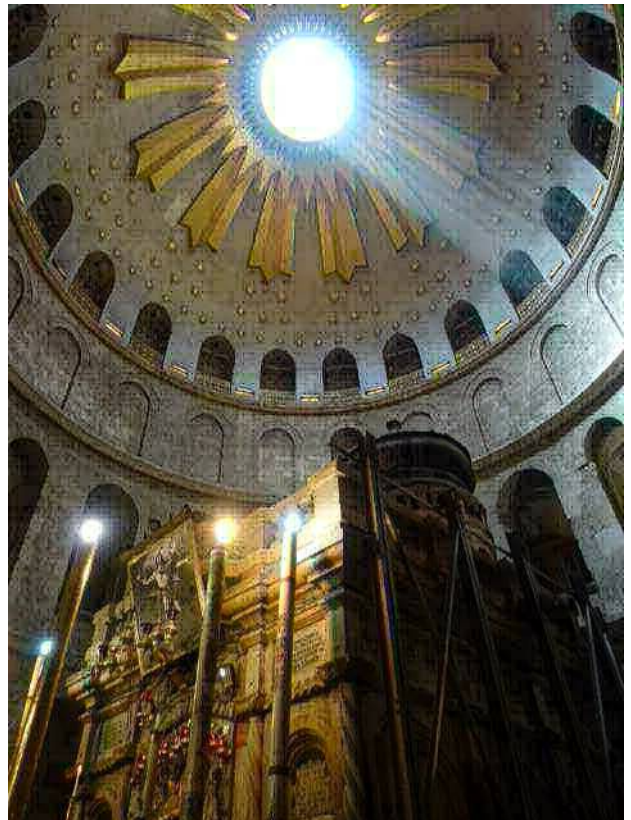
It was the Christian Quarter where we would spend most of our time today, although we did wander a little into the Muslim area – where a young man told us “this was for Muslims only” We were not convinced that was entirely correct but he did re-direct us to the route we really wanted!

Our main focus was in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher which is built over the presumed sites of Jesus' crucifixion, burial and resurrection. The present-day church is administered by several Christian churches and secular organizations in a complicated arrangement that has lasted for centuries. While the Greek Orthodox and the Roman Catholic Churches have a permanent presence here, Anglican and Protestant Churches do not, and some regard the Garden Tomb (just outside the city walls) as the site of the crucifixion and resurrection.





*Station  
10*



## ***The Church of the Holy Sepulcher***

***Top: The main entrance and the place where Jesus was stripped of his clothes (Station 10)***

***Bottom Left: The Catholicon where large masses are held under its Dome “at the Center of the World”***

***Bottom Right: The Rotunda over the Holy Sepulcher Chapel***

## *Stations of The Cross 10-13*

**10**

**Mark 15,24: "And when they had crucified him, they parted his garments, casting lots upon them, what every man should take".**

*Luke (23: 33-45, 38)*

**23:33 And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand, and the other on the left.**

**23:34 Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do. And they parted his raiment, and cast lots.**

**23:35 And the people stood beholding. And the rulers also with them derided him, saying, He saved others; let him save himself, if he be Christ, the chosen of God.**

**23:38 And a superscription also was written over him in letters of Greek, and Latin, and Hebrew, THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.**

**11**

**12**

<sup>50</sup> And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit.

**Matthew 27:50**

**John 19:38-42**

<sup>38</sup> Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jewish leaders. With Pilate's permission, he came and took the body away. <sup>39</sup> He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds. <sup>40</sup> Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs. <sup>41</sup> At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid. <sup>42</sup> Because it was the Jewish day of Preparation and since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

**13**



The Church (perhaps more accurately, churches and chapels under one roof) is a series of buildings in what at first appears to be a very haphazard arrangement. Since the time that the first Christian Roman Emperor Constantine ordered that a church replace an earlier Pagan temple, this site has undergone many changes and each seems to have resulted in another chapel, annex or a whole new structure. In addition, the Crusaders and each main branch of the Christian Church (particularly the Orthodox and Roman Catholic) have “put their stamp” on this holy place, making this “unique church, which bears little resemblance to any church most visitors know from home” (Israeli Ministry of Tourism).

After 2000 years of history, wars and different occupying forces it seems to me that a precise positioning might be open to debate, but I find that of little real consequence. Here we were, entering a church dating from the fourth century, albeit essentially re-built to its present form at the time of the Crusades, that may stand on the Biblical Golgotha (Calvary), and may enclose the Uncion Stone (where Jesus’ body was prepared for burial), as well as the actual tomb in which He lay for three days before the Resurrection.

So this site may not be exact. It may be a few miles away or somewhere else entirely. Nevertheless, this particular site caused early Christians to build a church which has brought countless people of all faiths here, just as we were today. The events of the time and their place in History are a matter of both record and Faith and it is the latter that is pre-eminent for most who visit here. If this church (beautiful in its own right but - almost to be expected - overshadowed by the chapels, altars and annexes pertaining to the Death and Resurrection of Christ) can represent a point of focus for Believers, then that should be sufficient. If, as so many clearly believe, Calvary is here and not “somewhere in the vicinity”, then that must surely add to its Center of The World claim under the dome of the Crusader Church. For my part, I knew that I had to visit every corner of this world-famous site and see the final Stations of The Cross, the altar over the stone where the Cross was erected, the Tomb of Joseph of Arimathea and, of course, the sepulcher itself. In this latter we were thwarted today by the long lines but..... another day, perhaps.

We were, however, able to lay our hands on the Uncion Stone. This particular slab dates only from 1810 and even the tradition is attested only to the Crusader era so, once again, absolute points of reference and physical details may have been amended with the passing of time. For the prostrate faithful who touched and wiped the stone with handkerchiefs or briefly laid candles or other mementos on the tablet in reverence, the connection to the Savior was clearly manifest regardless of global coordinates.



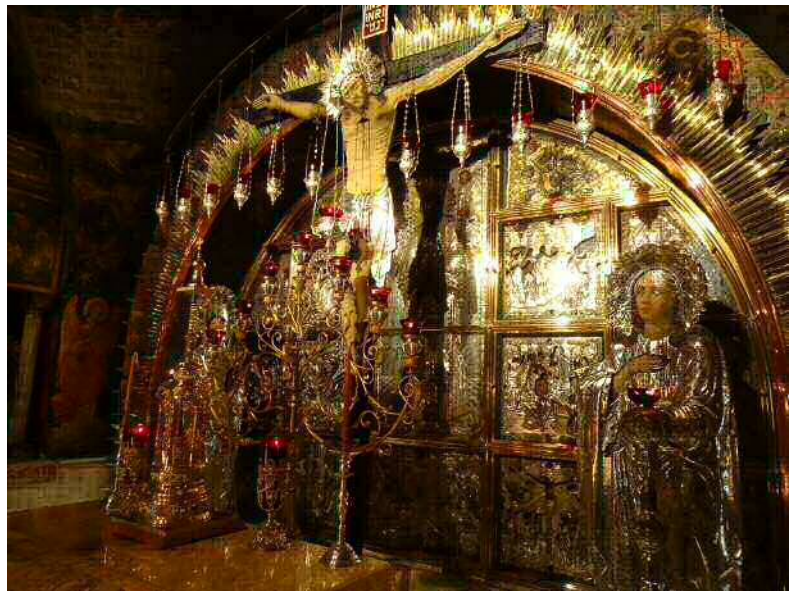
*The mural depicting the preparation of Christ's body for burial and the present day Uncion Stone (Station 13) at which the Faithful touch and wonder.....*

On the south side of the altar via the ambulatory (is a stairway climbing to Calvary (Golgotha), traditionally regarded as the site of Jesus' crucifixion and the most lavishly decorated part of the church. The main altar there belongs to the Greek Orthodox, which contains The Rock of Calvary (12th Station of the Cross). The rock can be seen under glass on both sides of the altar, and beneath the altar there is a hole said to be the place where the cross was raised. The Roman Catholics (Franciscans) have an altar to the side, The Chapel of the Nailing of the Cross (11th Station of the Cross). On the left of the altar, towards the Eastern Orthodox chapel, there is a statue of Mary.





*Station 11, The Chapel of the Nailing to The Cross and (next to Station 12) the Statue of Mary*



*The Rock of Golgotha;  
The Crucifixion Altar  
(Station 12);  
and the hole beneath the Al-  
tar where the Cross stood*





The Catholicon – On the east side opposite the Rotunda is the Crusader structure housing the main altar of the church, today the Greek Orthodox catholicon. The second, smaller dome sits directly over the transept crossing the choir where the *compas*, once thought to be the center of the world (associated to the site of the Crucifixion and the Resurrection) is situated East of this is a large wall of icons demarcating the Orthodox sanctuary; the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem on the south side facing the throne of the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch on the north side.

The “Church at the Center of the World”, where masses are held today, is a beautiful sanctuary in its own right but might be overlooked or perhaps taken for granted as it sits above, next to and within the Holy sites that tell the story of Jesus’ final hours and, three days later, His Resurrection. And there are so many other sites of importance under this one roof which is the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. We saw the place (now below ground level) where Jesus and the two who were to be crucified with Him were held prisoner immediately prior to the Crucifixion, the grave of Joseph of Arimathea, the Chapel of Mary Magdalene and, of course the Chapel (Edicule) which houses the Tomb. As we indicated above, we were not to get inside this chapel today (nor, it turned out when we returned several days later) as several hundred pilgrims had had the same idea and formed long, slow-moving lines.

Clearly not actually being able to pass by the presumed site of Jesus’ burial was a disappointment but, as we have noted several times both at this site and many others of significance that we have visited around the world, that disappointment is short-lived and totally superseded by the thrill of “being there”. Whether this was the exact site (certainly of debate by many) or whether it was some yards distant (or even miles away as some believe); whether we were standing on Golgotha or simply close; whether we entered the chapel or merely saw its entrance— no amount of uncertainty could detract from the moment, nor will it fog the memory of being in this place.



### Tomb of Joseph of Arimathea

*“Now there was a virtuous and righteous man named Joseph who, though he was a member of the council, had not consented to their plan of action. He came from the Jewish town of Arimathea and was awaiting the kingdom of God.”*

*(Luke 23: 50-51)*



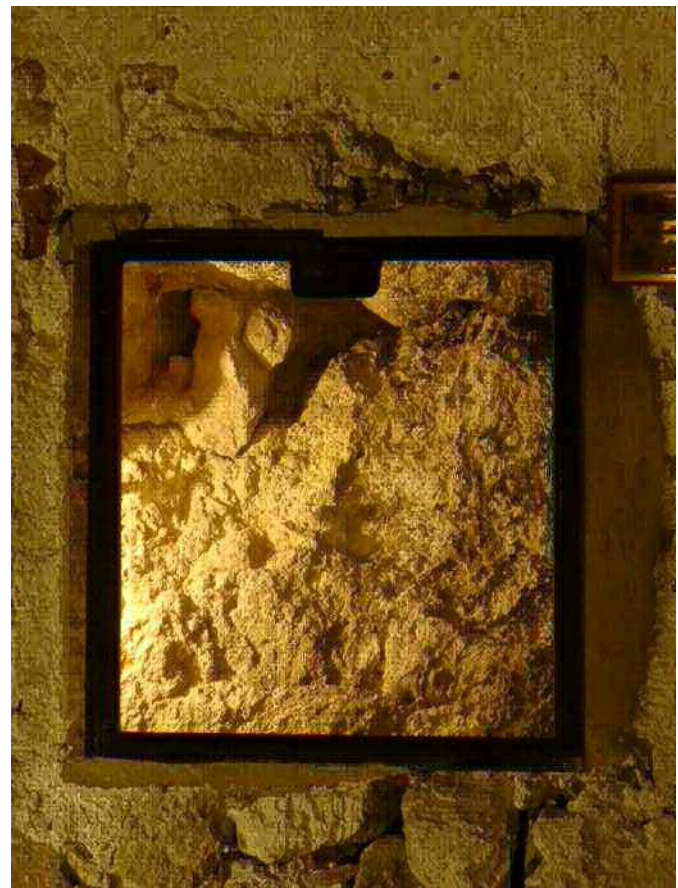
*At the east end of the north aisle is the chapel of the Prison of Christ, which according to 12th-century tradition housed Jesus and the two thieves before the Crucifixion. The first known mention of this is in the 8th century and the chapel probably originated as a liturgical station where the Passion and Death of Christ were commemorated.*



*The Imprisonment Site (above)  
and the Chapel of Mary Magdalene (left)*



The **Chapel of Adam** is directly beneath the Chapel of Calvary upstairs, and an ancient tradition suggests that Adam was buried here and that the blood of Jesus trickled down to his skull. Here the rock of Calvary (right) can be seen again, with a **fissure** running through it. Some believe the fissure was caused by the earthquake at the time Christ died.



The imprisonment site (of which I knew nothing!), the simple but beautiful chapel dedicated to Mary Magdalene, and the Chapel of Adam (again not within my sphere of knowledge) are just three more—of many—sites that make up the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Whether you wish to ascribe every aspect of its contents to actual events (the Adam burial site being perhaps the most difficult to accept) or whether you are more sanguine about the authenticity of any or all identified sites, or whether your Faith alone supersedes any inherent skepticism, it is impossible not to be touched, moved and, I believe, changed to some extent by a visit to this Church. We certainly feel fortunate to have been included.



Finally, there is of course the tomb itself which we were unable to see on either of our visits to the church. Why we thought that returning on Sunday for a second attempt to get inside the Edicule would prove more fruitful is difficult to imagine in hindsight. That's what we did, however, only to be witness to an Orthodox service that served the congregation in the Cathedral, while the sacraments were prepared and blessed in the edicule itself. It seems that dozens of priests entered the chapel and returned with bread and wine to be presented to the congregation both in the main church and amassed just outside the entrance to the tomb. All the while, a small but powerful group of cantors from two lofts provided appropriate chant to the somewhat chaotic scene below. At the same time, the long line of those waiting to enter the tomb were inching forward but were clearly not about to enter for some time. And neither were we! We saw the entrance to the chapel, we saw the dome directly above the presumed small cave across which the stone was rolled—and that was as far as we were going to get on this visit. Again, a minor disappointment but one that will never detract from being a part of this place.



*The entrance to the Edicule (above) and  
the masses waiting to enter.*



*Mark (15: 46-47)*

*15:46 And he bought fine linen, and took him down, and wrapped him in the linen, and laid him in a sepulcher which was hewn out of a rock, and rolled a stone unto the door of the sepulcher.*

*15:47 And Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph beheld where he was laid.*

14

So, the site of the Crucifixion and Resurrection is not “a green hill far away, without a city wall” anymore and that image has been complemented in our minds by a completely different – but equally deeply etched – picture of closely spaced sites under one roof. If these sites are indeed in the correct geographical locations, the proximity of Cross and Tomb (about 100 feet) is perhaps one of the more surprising revelations of the visit for us.





*Time for coffee—and a check of the guide book.*

*T-shirts reflect both reality and hope for this city*

Following our two hours in the Church we had coffee at a street café and then started down the Via Dolorosa to visit



(in reverse order) the Stations of the Cross outside today's church. Each Station is marked by the appropriate number on the wall of the nearest building and several also have small chapels. The walk of less than half a mile follows an almost straight line through today's narrow



(less than 10 feet?) streets lined with shops and businesses. Again, the picture of an open, steep, perhaps grassy or stony path of 2000 years ago (my image) has been replaced by this paved route crowded by buildings such that the sun rarely reaches the pavement. It is today (and probably has been for a very long time) one of the major arteries of the Old City and is reminiscent of so many Middle Eastern souks or market areas.



***27And following Him was a large crowd of the people, and of women who were mourning and lamenting Him. 28But Jesus turning to them said, Daughters of Jerusalem, stop weeping for Me, but weep for yourselves and for your children....***

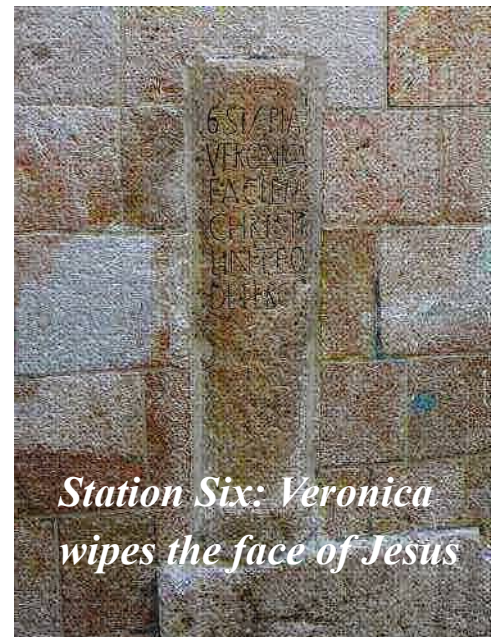
***Luke23: 27-28***

*We crossed a street, and came presently to the former residence of St. Veronica. When the Savior passed there, she came out, full of womanly compassion, and spoke pitying words to him, undaunted by the hootings and the threatenings of the mob, and wiped the perspiration from his face with her handkerchief.*

*We had heard so much of St. Veronica, and seen her picture by so many masters, that it was like meeting an old friend unexpectedly to come upon her ancient home in Jerusalem. The strangest thing about the incident that has made her name so famous, is, that when she wiped the perspiration away, the print of the Savior's face remained upon the handkerchief, a perfect portrait, and so remains unto this day.*

*We knew this, because we saw this handkerchief in a cathedral in Paris, in another in Spain, and in two others in Italy. In the Milan cathedral it costs five francs to see it, and at St. Peter's, at Rome, it is almost impossible to see it at any price. No tradition is so amply verified as this of St. Veronica and her handkerchief.*

*Mark Twain on his visit to Europe and the Holy Land, 1867.*



***Station Six: Veronica  
wipes the face of Jesus***



***21 A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross.***

***Mark 15: 21***





### *John 19:25-27*

*<sup>25</sup> Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. <sup>26</sup> When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, "Woman, here is your son," <sup>27</sup> and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.*

It would appear that, if this meeting did indeed take place, it was closer to the Crucifixion site and immediately before Jesus' death. As with all the Stations, there is obviously some doubt as to exact locations and, indeed, specifically what took place. For this reason, and probably others, the Bible verses (New and Old Testament)) are the Churches' recommendations for appropriate citation as the Stations of the Cross are commemorated not just here in Jerusalem but around the world. Indeed, different denominations would seem to favor different texts, either their own prayers or from the Testaments.

### *Isaiah 53:4-5*

*<sup>4</sup> Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.*

*<sup>5</sup> But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.*

### *Matthew 11:28-30*

*<sup>28</sup> Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.*

*<sup>29</sup> Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls.*

*<sup>30</sup> For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*



*Condemned  
and  
Scourged*





As shown above, some of the Stations have inscriptions, others an appropriate New Testament reference, but for the most part specific descriptions must come from an ability to navigate the Gospels and, indeed, the Old Testament - or carry a good guide book! Stations I and II, at the end of our walk, are widely regarded as the Praetorium referred to in the Gospels and are on the site of the Antonia fortress where Jesus was condemned by Pontius Pilate, scourged and given His cross. A small, beautiful church has been built adjacent to this site.



This marked the end of our journey for today, although we still had to walk back up the Via Dolorosa (again nowhere near as steep as my prior image). On the way, we walked on Roman stones that had been part of this street but buried for centuries.



Paving stones, apparently from the Second Temple Period (ca. 100 B.C.E.-100 C.E.) The street was found in its entirety 3 meters below the existing level and was partially restored by the Municipality of Jerusalem through East Jerusalem Development Ltd. (1985-1987)

As we made our way through the Christian Quarter, along this most Christian of streets, the imposing minaret (right) suddenly dominated the view, a stark reminder that Jerusalem is a divided city with over one third the population being Muslim and almost two thirds being Jews. Christians account for only two percent. Is this structure in this place a reminder of the division or a symbol of potential peaceful co-existence? Only time will tell.

We left the Old City via the Jaffa Gate and once again saw the imposing city walls. These walls, dating from the early 16<sup>th</sup> Century when Jerusalem was part of the Ottoman Empire, are still intact and parts of the ramparts are available for a short walking tour – but our legs told us that experience would have to wait for another day!

Tonight we had dinner at the Olive and Fish restaurant only a few minutes' walk from the hotel where we enjoyed a very good meal and re-lived a most interesting and moving day.





## Thursday April 24

We were up at 7:30 to get an early breakfast before our tour to Masada and the Dead Sea departed. We were supposed to be picked up at 8:30 but it was actually nearer 9am when we left. Even then, because of the way in which tour groups are picked up at hotels all over town and then redistributed to other buses at one central location, it was approaching 10am before we were leaving Jerusalem.

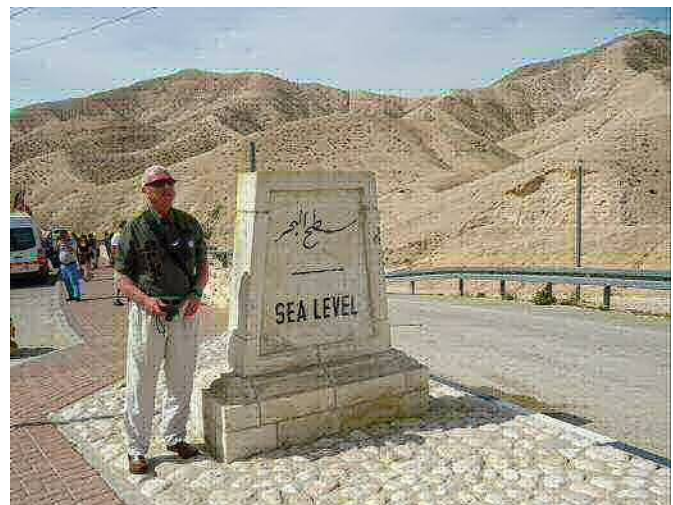
The city is at an elevation of about 2500 feet above (Mediterranean) sea level but our destination today was the lowest place on earth – the Dead Sea, at 1400 feet **below** sea level. So, in a distance of less than 20 miles we descended about 4000 feet on a well-paved divided highway.

We were now in the West Bank (of the Jordan River and the Dead Sea) and in an area that has been the center of conflict between Israel and Palestine for decades. There are three defined areas to the West Bank (although the boundaries are much convoluted – and often disputed); one entirely under Israeli control; one entirely under Palestinian control; and a third, essentially within greater Jerusalem, that is under joint administration. Our guide was quick to point out that our entire day would be spent in the Israeli controlled region and would therefore be safe!

Although Jerusalem itself has many lush areas and is surprisingly green and filled with decorative flower beds and parks, we were now in true desert – almost barren, rock covered and hot! Even here, however, there were green areas along what were now dried river beds and there is sufficient rainfall at the higher elevations to create seasonal flooding and sufficient irrigation to support a number of farms and kibbutzim. The overwhelming feel, nevertheless, is that of a mountainous, rocky terrain which borders a large inland lake – the Dead Sea.



*At Sea Level..... and definitely in the desert!*



It was also in this area, at Qumram, that the famous Dead Sea Scrolls were found in caves in 1947. The initial finding was made by Bedouin shepherds (there are many still living in tents in this area today) and they and a team of archaeologists worked the area until 1956.



*The Dead Sea Scrolls are a collection of 981 texts discovered between 1946 and 1956 at Khirbet Qumran in the West Bank. They were found inside caves about a mile inland from the northwest shore of the Dead Sea, from which they derive their name. The texts are of great historical, religious, and linguistic significance because they include the earliest known surviving manuscripts of works later included in the Hebrew Bible canon, along with deuterocanonical and extra-biblical manuscripts which preserve evidence of the diversity of religious thought in late Second Temple Judaism.*

*The texts are written in Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and Nabataean, mostly on parchment but with some written on papyrus and bronze. The manuscripts have been dated to various ranges between 408 BCE and 318 CE.*

The Dead Sea is fed only by the Jordan River, which is now so heavily dammed and depleted of water for upstream farming and industry that the Sea level is dropping at an alarming rate of about 3 feet per year. The water level has dropped so much that the lake is now in two parts and a project is underway to “refill” the Dead Sea with waters from the Red Sea to the south. A joint Palestinian, Israel and Jordan agreement will build a canal (actually just a pipeline) with the hope of maintaining, or even adding to, the water in the Dead Sea. It is interesting to note that the water flowing northward will actually be brine (from a desalination plant) in order to maintain the mineral level of the Dead Sea and preserve its health attributes and its tourism.

A “swim” in the Dead Sea (after an appropriate covering with therapeutic mud) was scheduled for the afternoon of our visit (we chose to decline, having performed this ritual several years ago only a few miles away in Jordan) but first we went to the site that had caused us to take this tour. This was the ancient Roman fortress city of Masada, occupied and made palatial by King Herod when he was puppet king during the Roman occupation. It was built on top of, and terraced down from, a mesa-like hilltop 1300 feet above the Dead Sea.



During the first of the Jewish-Roman wars, Jewish rebels – the Sicarii – overthrew the Roman garrison and were further supplemented by more Sicarii after the second temple at Jerusalem was destroyed. In 73AD the Roman Governor decided that it was time to take back the fortress and laid siege from several (still obvious) encampments surrounding the hilltop.

Eventually an enormous ramp was built by the Romans which was designed to allow troops to storm

the fort at wall level. The Jewish Zealot occupiers realized that they were about to be beaten but rather than surrender to the Romans they chose to “surrender to God” and kill themselves.



***Masada: The walking path from the cable car (our preference) and the view from the top towards the Dead Sea***





Of the almost 1000, ten were selected to do most of the killing and then were to kill themselves in turn. This apparently happened and was later confirmed and recorded by a few women and children who had hidden throughout this mass killing and later surrendered to the Romans.

In addition to being a legendary site of martyrdom, the fortress and palace were magnificent examples of Roman architecture and art and were as impressive as many other examples throughout the Empire. Even today there are clear examples of the traditional bathhouses, cisterns, mosaics and frescoes typical of the advanced civilization of the time.

Although it is possible to walk up to the fortress via a “Serpent Path”, we were fortunate that a 3000 feet cable car ride is available today and that was the approach we selected (as well as for the descent after our visit). We spent about two hours wandering the ruins and trying to picture the area as it had once existed. To this end there were several excellent models showing not only the overall complex but also depicting specific buildings, complete with columns and mosaic floors. As an archeological site it is certainly impressive and is made all the more interesting as an historically important example of the Jewish Faith.

The following excerpt from the *Jewish Virtual Library* describes the Masada story far more clearly than we could.

*Masada (Hebrew for fortress) is a place of gaunt and majestic beauty that has become one of the Jewish people's greatest symbols as the place where the last Jewish stronghold against Roman invasion stood. Next to Jerusalem, it is the most popular destination of tourists visiting Israel.*



*More than two thousand years have passed since the fall of the Masada fortress yet the regional climate and its remoteness have helped to preserve the remains of its extraordinary story.*

## *Geography*

*Masada is located atop an isolated rock cliff at the western end of the Judean Desert overlooking the Dead Sea. On the east side, the rock falls in a sheer drop of about 450 meters to the Dead Sea and on the western edge it stands about 100 meters above the surrounding terrain. The natural approaches to the cliff top are very difficult.*

## *History*

*The only written source about Masada is Josephus Flavius' The Jewish War. Flavius was a young leader at the outbreak of the Great Jewish Rebellion against Rome (66 CE) when he was appointed governor of Galilee. Calling himself Josephus Flavius, he became a Roman citizen and a successful historian.*

*According to Flavius, Herod the Great built the fortress of Masada between 37 and 31 BCE. Herod had been made King of Judea by his Roman overlords and “furnished this fortress as a refuge for himself.” It included a fortified wall around the plateau, storehouses, large cisterns ingeniously filled with rainwater, barracks, palaces and an armory.*



*Some 75 years after Herod's death, at the beginning of the Revolt of the Jews against the Romans in 66 CE, a group of Jewish rebels overcame the Roman garrison of Masada. After the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple (70 CE) they were joined by zealots and their families who had fled from Jerusalem. There, they held out for three years, raiding and harassing the Romans.*

*Then, in 73 CE, Roman governor Flavius Silva marched against Masada with the Tenth Legion, auxiliary units and thousands of Jewish prisoners-of-war. The Romans established camps at the base of Masada, laid siege to it and built a circumvallation wall. They then constructed a rampart of thousands of tons of stones and beaten earth against the western approaches of the fortress and, in the spring of 74 CE, moved a battering ram up the ramp and breached the wall of the fortress.*

*Once it became apparent that the Tenth Legion's battering rams and catapults would succeed in breaching Masada's walls, Elazar ben Yair - the Zealots' leader - decided that all the Jewish defenders should commit suicide; the alternative facing the fortress's defenders were hardly more attractive than death.*

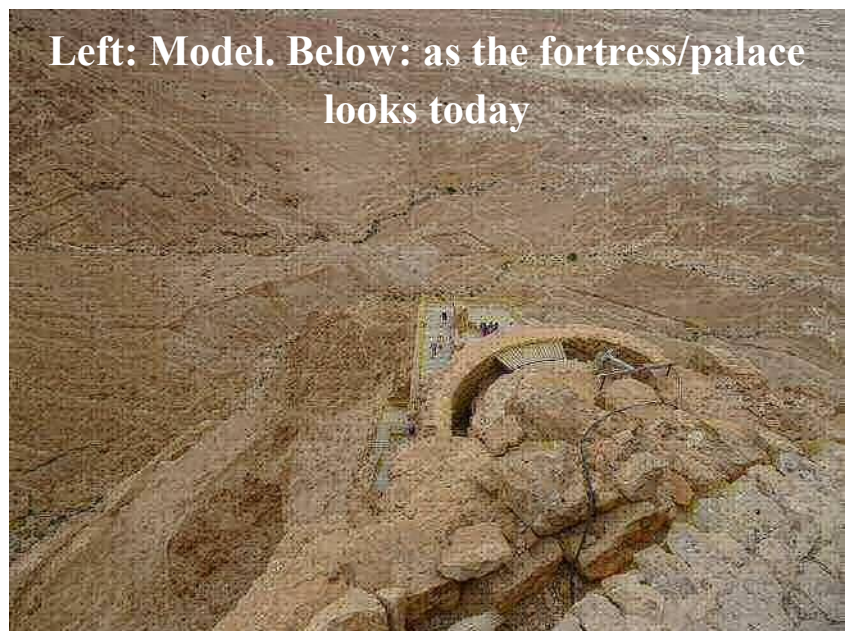
*Flavius dramatically recounts the story told him by two surviving women. The defenders – almost one thousand men, women and children – led by ben Yair, burnt down the fortress and killed each other. The Zealots cast lots to choose 10 men to kill the remainder. They then chose among themselves the one man who would kill the survivors. That last Jew then killed himself.*

*Elazar's final speech clearly was a masterful oration:*

*"Since we long ago resolved never to be servants to the Romans, nor to any other than to God Himself, Who alone is the true and just Lord of mankind, the time is now come that obliges us to make that resolution true in practice ...We were the very first that revolted, and we are the last to fight against them; and I cannot but esteem it as a favor that God has granted us, that it is still in our power to die bravely, and in a state of freedom."*

*The heroic story of Masada and its dramatic end attracted many explorers to the Judean desert in attempts to locate the remains of the fortress. The site was identified in 1842, but intensive excavations took place only in the mid-1960's with the help of hundreds of enthusiastic volunteers from Israel and from many foreign countries.*

*To many, Masada symbolizes the determination of the Jewish people to be free in its own land.*







***Top: The fortress and the Roman walls and buildings***

***Middle: Underfloor heating and water cistern tanks***

***Bottom: Mosaic floors and wall frescoes***





*An ancient synagogue..... And a modern Jewish scribe on the site*



*One of several Roman encampments  
as they surrounded the for-  
tress..... and the final*



# Masada

*As a geological feature—impressive*

*As a Roman Fortress and Palace—amazing*

*As a Symbol of Jewish Faith—incomparable*



The late morning on the mountain was a little overcast and there was a slight cooling breeze at that elevation. During the following two hour visit to the Dead Sea resort, however, the skies became clearer and the breeze dissipated such that it was 100F in the shade where we spent most of the time while our fellow tourists dipped and floated in the warm waters – and the much hotter air. We were looking across to the hills of Jordan where a black outline of a horse could be clearly seen at this time of day. It was attributed to late afternoon shadows, but more probably was an unusual depression in the hillside.



### ***The Ritual at the Dead Sea:***

***Cover yourself with therapeutic mud, float, and rinse!***

It was after 6:30 when we got back to the hotel after a 10 hour day out so we were pleased to do nothing more than clean up and walk across the street to a small restaurant for another very pleasant dinner – before collapsing into bed around ten.



## Friday April 25

We were once again ready for our tour pick-up at 8:30, but today was to be just a half day trip to nearby Bethlehem. For this we had to cross into the Palestinian controlled sector of the West Bank and our Israeli driver had to be supplemented by a Palestinian guide once we crossed the checkpoint. Our driver told us that he is issued a special permit to enter this area as Israelis are not normally allowed into the Palestinian occupied zone. His point was underscored by huge warning signs stating that “Entrance for Israel citizens is forbidden, dangerous to your lives and is against Israeli Law”. Despite this somewhat somber warning, neither of us felt in any danger throughout our visit and simply marveled once again at the sites of such historical and religious significance that we would see.

The first of these was the “Shepherds’ Field”, the presumed location, about a mile from the Nativity site, where the shepherds were told of the birth by the angels. A point which had previously been lost on us was that, up to this point, lambs had been sacrificed to God and that this particular flock was in effect being reared for that purpose. So, in addition to what must have been an alarming message from the Heavenly Host, these men were being told that they no longer had a livelihood!

### *Luke 2: 8-11*

*<sup>8</sup> And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.*

*<sup>9</sup> And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.*

*<sup>10</sup> And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.*

*<sup>11</sup> For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.*



*The entrance to the Shepherds’ Field and the view across to Bethlehem*



Today there are two buildings to commemorate this event; a small church at the point where the shepherds were told and which contains three murals depicting the events of that day; and an even smaller chapel built over the cave that was used for their shelter while tending the flock. Our guide made it a “living scene” and, although it did not have the same effect as that experienced at the Crucifixion site two days ago, the green grass, together with the cypress and palm trees all around, now made it the truly pastoral scene that it was then.





*Attractive Murals  
and altars in the  
church.*

*The cave where the  
Shepherds shel-  
tered.*

*And the more  
peaceful area out-  
side.*





We then drove to the Church of The Nativity itself. This church has existed in some form for 1500 years and was built to replace the original one on this site commissioned by the Emperor Constantine. The building is now a part of the Orthodox Church but was a Roman Catholic Church for over a thousand years. The building sits above the cave where the birth of Jesus took place and the manger just a few feet away.



*Above: Waiting our turn to visit the birth site and the manger—semi-organized chaos.*

*Left: The scene in the underfloor birthplace - Chaos!*

The under floor space (the grotto) is small and has a roughhewn ceiling (it was a cave) and only a limited number of visitors are allowed down the ten or so steps to the two points of pilgrimage. Despite uniformed crowd control personnel (and much shouting and pointing), the area of the manger was very crowded with much pushing and elbowing for position – or so it seemed. Clearly almost everyone there was on a once-in-a-lifetime visit and wanted to get close to and touch the Holy sites so there was a “Not so Christian” clamor for position in claustrophobic quarters.

However, we were at the presumed site of Jesus’ birth so a slight discomfort and a rushed feeling were a small price to pay for the experience. Presumably the crowded and frenetic feelings of the visit itself will fade soon and leave only the inescapable fact that we have been to the site that started two thousand years of change, and yet of an undeniable constancy. Again I feel obliged to say that, no matter what faith, and to what extent that that faith is manifested in any individual, there can be little debate that the events at this site and those of thirty years later just a short distance away, have prompted the best in art, sculpture and music – and incredible emotion in those who have seen and heard them. The spiritual aspect is either a basis for these feelings or an incredible bonus for those who are so moved.

**Isaiah 9:6** - For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.

*The altar above the birth place.*

*The star marks the presumed exact spot.*







*The crowds wanting to touch the star and get close to the birth place made it difficult to get good photographs. But we were there!*



*The manger*

**Luke 2:7** - And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

Leaving the frantic commotion of the main Basilica (see inset on opposite page), we entered the far more modern—and much more serene—Church of Saint Catherine, the Roman Catholic Church. As with the Crucifixion site in Jerusalem, the Birth-place of Jesus is coveted by all branches of the Church and each wants to place its own touch on the Holy Site.

I suppose it is comforting that these desires are accommodated with no outward signs of “in-fighting”, although there has been conflict at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher on occasion. In any event, the serenity and beauty of this second church and its courtyard were a pleasant contrast.

It is also worth noting that the security and crowd control within the Basilica of the Nativity was in the hands of (presumably Muslim) Palestinians!





We *The Church of St Catherine*  
then walked about a quarter mile through the streets of Beth-

*The main Basilica of the Nativity is maintained by the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem. It is designed like a typical Roman basilica, with five aisles (formed by Corinthian columns) and an apse in the eastern end, where the sanctuary is. The church features golden mosaics covering the side walls, which are now largely decayed. The basilica is entered through a very low door, called the Door of Humility. The original Roman style floor has since been covered over, but there is a trap door in the modern floor which opens up to reveal a portion of the original mosaic floor. The church also features a large gilded iconostasis, and a complex array of lamps throughout the entire building. The wooden rafters were donated by King Edward IV of England.*

*The adjoining Church of St. Catherine, the Roman Catholic Church, was built in a more modern Gothic revival style, and has since been further modernized according to the liturgical trends which followed Vatican II. This is the church where the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem celebrates Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve. Certain customs still observed in this Midnight Mass predate Vatican II, but must be maintained because the *status quo* (the customs, rights and duties of the various church authorities that have custody of the Holy Places) was legally fixed by a decree in 1852, under the Ottoman Empire, that is still in force to this day.*

*The Grotto of the Nativity, an underground cave located beneath the basilica, enshrines the site where Jesus is said to have been born. The exact spot is marked beneath an altar by a 14-pointed Silver Star set into the marble floor and surrounded by silver lamps. This altar is denominationally neutral, although it features primarily Armenian Apostolic influences. Another altar in the Grotto, which is maintained by the Roman Catholics, marks the site where traditionally Mary laid the newborn Baby in the manger.*



lehem, which is today a very open and pleasant modern city of about 25,000. It has over thirty hotels, a reflection of the importance of tourism to the community. Since 1948, when the town was 85% Christian and the Christian population has steadily decreased both in terms of absolute numbers (due to people leaving) and as a percentage of the total (as a result of a large influx of Palestinians). It is now estimated that the Christian population is about 15% and, as we walked across Manger Square, a predominant feature was the Mosque of Omar.



*Manger Square and the Mosque of Omar.*

*Our walk through Bethlehem.*



We were on our way to the **Milk Grotto**. Again, a confession: this was new to both of us. Supposedly this was the place where the Holy Family hid before their flight to Egypt and it is said that Mary's milk as she was feeding Jesus fell to the floor and turned the cave into a beautiful white stone. Certainly the stone is white today (unlike the reddish brown one sees on entry) and the quiet, underground room is a tranquil respite from the busy Nativity scene. It is quite serene and contains a beautiful icon of the Virgin and Child. It was an ideal spot to complete our tour of Bethlehem and start the return journey to Jerusalem.





The tour organizers had a different idea, however, and took us to the inevitable artisan shop where mementoes of this Holy place could be purchased. The specialties here were carvings made from the Olive tree – ubiquitous in Israel and mentioned frequently in The Bible. The hard wood of the branches is apparently suitable for detailed carvings and I must admit that we did our bit for the Christian economy in Palestine before getting back on the bus.



### *Leaving Palestine to return to Israel; the checkpoint gate and a reality check!*

The journey back was uneventful; the checkpoint was cursory; and we were soon enjoying a light lunch outdoors in one of the many cafes just outside the Jaffa Gate to the Old City.

The rest of our day was restful! And followed by an Italian dinner at one of a limited number of restaurants open on the Sabbath evening. This was a 20 minute walk from our hotel with pleasant surroundings and an authentic feel to the food.

### **Saturday April 26**

Our tour departed at 8:30 with the single destination of the ancient city of Jericho. Once again we entered the Palestinian sector but, as yesterday, with no problems and no feelings of insecurity.

We traveled on the same road as we had taken two days earlier (on the way to the Dead Sea and Masada) but for a much shorter stretch before turning north towards Jericho. Hence, although today it is part modern expressway and part a well-paved major highway, we had followed much the same path which Jesus had followed and which was the setting for the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

*Jesus answered, A certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who both stripped him and beat him, and departed, leaving him half dead. By chance a certain priest was going down that way. When he saw him, he passed by on the other side. In the same way a Levite also, when he came to the place, and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a certain Samaritan, as he travelled, came where he was. When he saw him, he was moved with compassion, came to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. He set him on his own animal, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. On the next day, when he departed, he took out two denarii, and gave them to the host, and said to him, 'Take care of him. Whatever you spend beyond that, I will repay you when I return.' Now which of these three do you think seemed to be a neighbor to him who fell among the robbers?"*

*Luke 10:30-35*

On the way to our destination, our guide had, as he said, "lowered our expectations" on the road to Jericho telling us not to expect to see the walls that came tumbling down nor, indeed, any walls of consequence in the city. Although we had already seen



many places on this trip that could be described as “incredible”, I doubt that there were many on the bus who truly had imagined they would see the fallen walls of an otherwise intact city—one that was 3500 years old. So, I was a little disappointed in this particular guide who felt it necessary to lower our expectations rather than (as with most other guides) bring whatever there was in Jericho “to life”. Certainly he could have reminded us of the reason behind the words of the well-known African-American spiritual and delved a little into the history leading up to the battle.

*The Battle of Jericho (Joshua 6:1-27) is the first battle of the Israelites during their conquest of Canaan following their forty year trek from Egypt. According to the narrative, the walls of Jericho fell after the Israelite army led by Moses' successor Joshua) marched around the city blowing their trumpets.*

*The biblical account describes the Israelites being led by Joshua and crossing the Jordan into Canaan where they laid siege to the city of Jericho. There, God spoke to Joshua telling him to march around the city once every day for six days with the seven priests carrying ram's horns in front of the ark. On the seventh day they were to march around the city seven times and the priests were to blow their ram's horns. And Joshua ordered the people to shout.*

*The walls of the city collapsed, and the Israelites were able to charge straight into the city. The city was completely destroyed, and every man, woman, child and animal in it was killed by Joshua's army by God's command. Only Rahab and her family were spared, because she had hidden two spies sent by Joshua. After this, Joshua burned the remains of the city and cursed any man who would rebuild the city of Jericho would do so at the cost of his firstborn son.*

In fact it turned out that much of the city – certainly the area we visited – is an enormous archeological site and there are examples of walls, rooms and artifacts that date not just from the time of Joshua (1400BC) but, it is claimed, go as far back as 7000 years ago. There were even claims that a city had been formed here as early as 10,000 years ago.



*Excavation Site in  
Jericho*

*-lots of walls and  
other features but  
dating from???*



The site being excavated looked essentially abandoned today and our guide told us that money is in short supply for a continuation of the work. Nevertheless, we did see some examples of structures, now well below ground level, that were built by some of the earliest non-nomadic people on earth. This area, close to the Jordan River had a plentiful water supply (not so obvious today) and this promoted farming and the establishment of permanent settlements.

Of slightly more contemporary interest, the hill desert beyond the city of Jericho is where Jesus spent his forty days and nights of fasting right after being baptized in the nearby Jordan. This is the Hill of Temptation which rises steeply from city level and now houses a Greek Orthodox Monastery about 2/3 of the way to the summit. At the summit are the walls of one of three palaces that Herod is said to have built in Jericho; obviously he was a powerful and rich man who learned to live well during the Roman occupation.



*Matthew 4:8-10*

*<sup>8</sup> Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. <sup>9</sup> And he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.”<sup>10</sup> Then Jesus said to him, “Be gone, Satan! For it is written,*

*“You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.”*



*Greek Orthodox Monastery and Herod's Palace on the Mount of Temptation*



Also in Jericho is the Sycamore tree into which Zacchaeus climbed to catch a better view of Jesus as he came through the city and was commanded to come down as Jesus wished to visit with him in his home – an unusual request of the unpopular tax collector who was seen more as a servant of Rome than as a “local”. Although the tree we saw is centuries old, it seems unlikely that we were looking at the one climbed in the Bible story.

*19 Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. <sup>2</sup> A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. <sup>3</sup> He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. <sup>4</sup> So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.*

*<sup>5</sup> When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.” <sup>6</sup> So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.*

*<sup>7</sup> All the people saw this and began to mutter, “He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.”*

*<sup>8</sup> But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.”*

*<sup>9</sup> Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. <sup>10</sup> For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”*

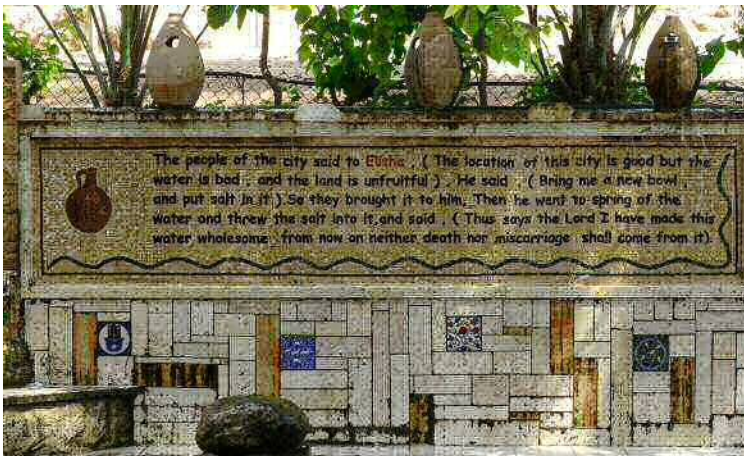
*Luke 19: 1-10*



*Zacchaeus' Sycamore Tree*



We did see a still- functioning spring of fresh, potable water that was supposedly made drinkable by Elisha who threw salt in the source to purify it.



Regardless of the absolute authenticity of these – and many other Biblical stories from this region – we were now a part of that history. We were in Jericho, the oldest city on earth and certainly the lowest (1300 feet below sea level); we had climbed (just a little way) up the Wilderness desert of Jesus' period of Temptation; on our way from Jerusalem we had been essentially on the road of the Good Samaritan; and we were now standing within a mile of the Baptism site (just across the River in Jordan and a place we had actually seen several years ago on a visit to that country). Simply being here was a privilege.



We returned to Jerusalem and left the bus at the Jaffa Gate to the Old City. After a light lunch we bought tickets for a walk along the ramparts atop the city walls.

*Modern Jerusalem as seen  
from the ramparts near  
Jaffa Gate*



We chose to cover about ½ mile on the south and east sides. The views of both Old and New cities were magnificent on a sunny, warm afternoon but the walk was quite a challenge as the ramparts changed levels with great frequency and with very steep steps!



### *Jerusalem Old City Ramparts*



*The Tower of David (above); View of East Jerusalem (right)*





## *View from the Ramparts of Temple Mount.*

*The Dome of the Rock (right)*

*The Al Aqsa Mosque (below)*



*"Then Solomon began to build the Temple of the Lord in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah. It was on the threshing-floor of Araunah the Jebusite, the place provided by David, his father."*

*- 2 Chronicles 3:1*

*Glory be to Him who did take His servant for a Journey by night from the Sacred Sanctuary to the farthest Sanctuary, whose precincts We did bless...."*

*- The Koran, Sura Al-Isra' 17:1*

The **Temple Mount** is one of the most important religious sites in the Old City of Jerusalem. It has been used as a religious site for thousands of years. At least four religious traditions are known to have made use of the Temple Mount: Judaism, Christianity, Roman religion, and Islam. The present site is dominated by three monumental structures from the early Umayyad period: the al-Aqsa Mosque, the Dome of the Rock and the Dome of the Chain. Herodian walls with additions dating back to the late Byzantine and early Islamic periods cut through the flanks of the Mount. It can be ascended via four gates, with guard posts of Israeli police in the vicinity of each.

Biblical scholars have often identified it with two biblical mountains of uncertain location: Mount Moriah where the story of the binding of Isaac is set, and Mount Zion where the original Jebusite fortress stood; however, both interpretations are disputed.

Judaism regards the Temple Mount as the place where God chose the divine presence to rest (Isa 8:18); according to the rabbinic sages whose debates produced the Talmud, it was from here the world expanded into its present form and where God gathered the dust used to create the first human, Adam. The site is the location of Abraham's binding of Isaac. According to the Bible, two Jewish Temples stood at the Temple Mount, though there is no proof for the first temple. However, the existence of Solomon's Temple on the Temple Mount is widely accepted. According to the Bible the site should function as the center of all national life—a governmental, judicial and, of course, religious center. During the Second Temple period it functioned also as an economic center. From that location the word of God will come out to all nations, and that is the site where all prayers are focused. According to Jewish tradition and scripture (2 Chronicles 3:1-2), the first temple was built by King Solomon the son of King David in 957 BCE and destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BCE. The second was constructed under the auspices of Zerubbabel in 516 BCE and destroyed by the Roman Empire in 70 CE. Afterwards the site remained undeveloped for six centuries, until the Arab conquest.<sup>[4]</sup> Jewish tradition maintains it is here the Third and final Temple will also be built. The location is the holiest site in Judaism and is the place Jews turn towards during prayer. Due to its extreme sanctity, many Jews will not walk on the Mount itself, to avoid unintentionally entering the area where the Holy of Holies stood, since according to Rabbinical law, some aspect of the divine presence is still present at the site. It was from the Holy of Holies that the High Priest communicated directly with God.

Among Sunni Muslims, the Mount is widely considered the third holiest site in Islam. Revered as the Noble Sanctuary (Bayt al-Maqdes or Bayt al-Muqaddas) and the location of Muhammad's journey to Jerusalem and ascent to heaven, the site is also associated with Jewish biblical prophets who are also venerated in Islam (Quran 2:4, 34:13-4). After the Muslim conquest of Jerusalem in 637 CE, Umayyad Caliphs commissioned the construction of the al-Aqsa Mosque and Dome of the Rock on the site.<sup>[6]</sup> The Dome was completed in 692 CE, making it one of the oldest extant Islamic structures in the world, after the Kaabah. The Al Aqsa Mosque rests on the far southern side of the Mount, facing Mecca. The Dome of the Rock currently sits in the middle, occupying or close to the area where the Bible mandates the Holy Temple be rebuilt.

In light of the dual claims of both Judaism and Islam, it is one of the most contested religious sites in the world. Since the Crusades, the Muslim community of Jerusalem has managed the site as a Waqf, without interruption. As the site is part of the Old City, controlled by Israel since 1967, both Israel and the Palestinian Authority claim sovereignty over it, and it remains a major focal point of the Arab-Israeli conflict. In an attempt to keep the status quo, the Israeli government enforces a controversial ban on prayer by non-Muslim visitors.



We re-entered the Old City near the Western (Wailing) Wall and saw the famous prayer site below Temple Mount. Presumably because our visit was towards the end of the Sabbath there were no crowds and only a handful of people touching the portion of Wall that we saw (no photographs allowed). Once again, however, we were immersed in a piece of history and at a place of deeply religious importance to those of the Jewish Faith.

Sites such as this — whether Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu or Christian in whatever part of the world, provide insights that make traveling the passion that it is for both of us.

Clearly, this particular venue — with its importance to the Jewish, Christian and Islamic Faiths—provided us with an experience that we will never forget.



Jewish tradition teaches that the Temple Mount is the focal point of Creation. In the center of the mountain lies the "Foundation Stone" of the world. Here Adam came into being. Here Abraham, Isaac and Jacob served God. The First and Second Temples were built upon this mountain. The Ark of the Covenant was set upon the Foundation Stone itself. Jerusalem was chosen by God as the dwelling place of the Shechinah. David longed to build the Temple, and Solomon his son built the First Temple here about 3000 years ago. It was destroyed by Nevuchadnezzar of Babylon. The Second Temple was rebuilt on its ruins seventy years later. It was razed by the Roman legions over 1900 years ago. The present Western Wall before you is a remnant of the western Temple Mount retaining walls. Jews have prayed in its shadow for hundreds of years, an expression of their faith in the rebuilding of the Temple. The Sages said about it: "The Divine Presence never moves from the Western Wall." The Temple Mount continues to be the focus of prayer for Jews from all over the world.



We returned to the Jaffa Gate along the narrow, crowded streets of the Muslim Quarter and then walked back to the hotel along the deserted shopping mall that had teemed with people on each of our earlier visits this week. The Sabbath is still regarded as a day of rest and prayer and virtually everything in the city is closed down. There are far fewer vehi-



cles on the streets, shops and cafes are closed (except in the non-Jewish areas) and those of the Faith who are out and about are generally on the way to or from the synagogue and are dressed accordingly. I can recall post-war England being similar on Sundays when I was young and the shock-wave of “Sunday opening hours” that began in the sixties. That melting of the Sabbath into just one of seven days has clearly not occurred here.

To that same point, our dinner tonight was at 9:30 as preparation work doesn’t start until sundown so cooks and wait staff can observe the full 24 hour period of Shabbat. However, the meal and the view from the Rooftop restaurant over the city at night were worth the wait and topped off another interesting day.

### Sunday April 27

We had no tour commitments today so we stayed in bed a little later and left for our walking tour of the Old City about 10am. Our first stop was at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher where we hoped to get into the chapel built over the site of Jesus’ tomb. The crowds had thwarted us a few days ago and we hoped that getting there a little earlier might be an advantage. Not so!

I don’t know why it hadn’t occurred to us but this being Sunday meant that many Christian visitors were in the church. In addition – and this certainly had not been expected – the chapel itself was in commission for a service as we arrived.

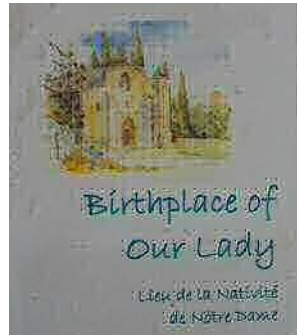


*Huge crowds in the rotunda and near the Holy Sepulcher Chapel. The entrance to the Edicule and the Tomb is seen in the two pictures above.*

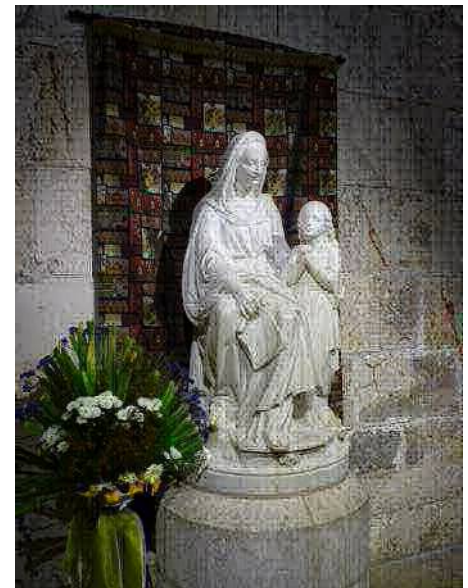


Actually, it would appear that priests (of the Orthodox Church) were preparing the Sacraments inside the chapel to feed a large congregation gathered in the main church and who filed out past the tomb chapel as we were standing there. So it wasn't clear exactly how long this would take but in addition a very long line had already formed in anticipation of seeing the tomb. In other words, we were at the end of a long, stationary line with no idea of a time when it would start to move. So near and yet so far..... But something to try again in a future visit, perhaps.

We left the Church and made our way down the Via Dolorosa again to the Church of St Anne which is built over the assumed site where the Virgin Mary was born. It is a beautiful little church built in garden surroundings.



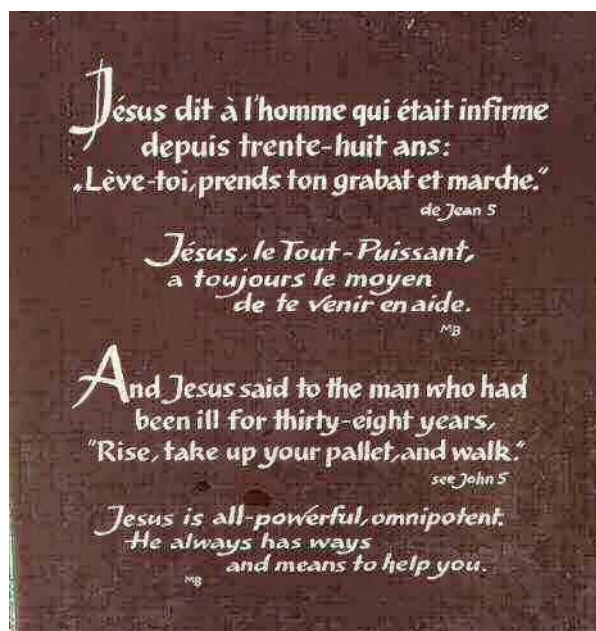
## *The Church of St Anne*



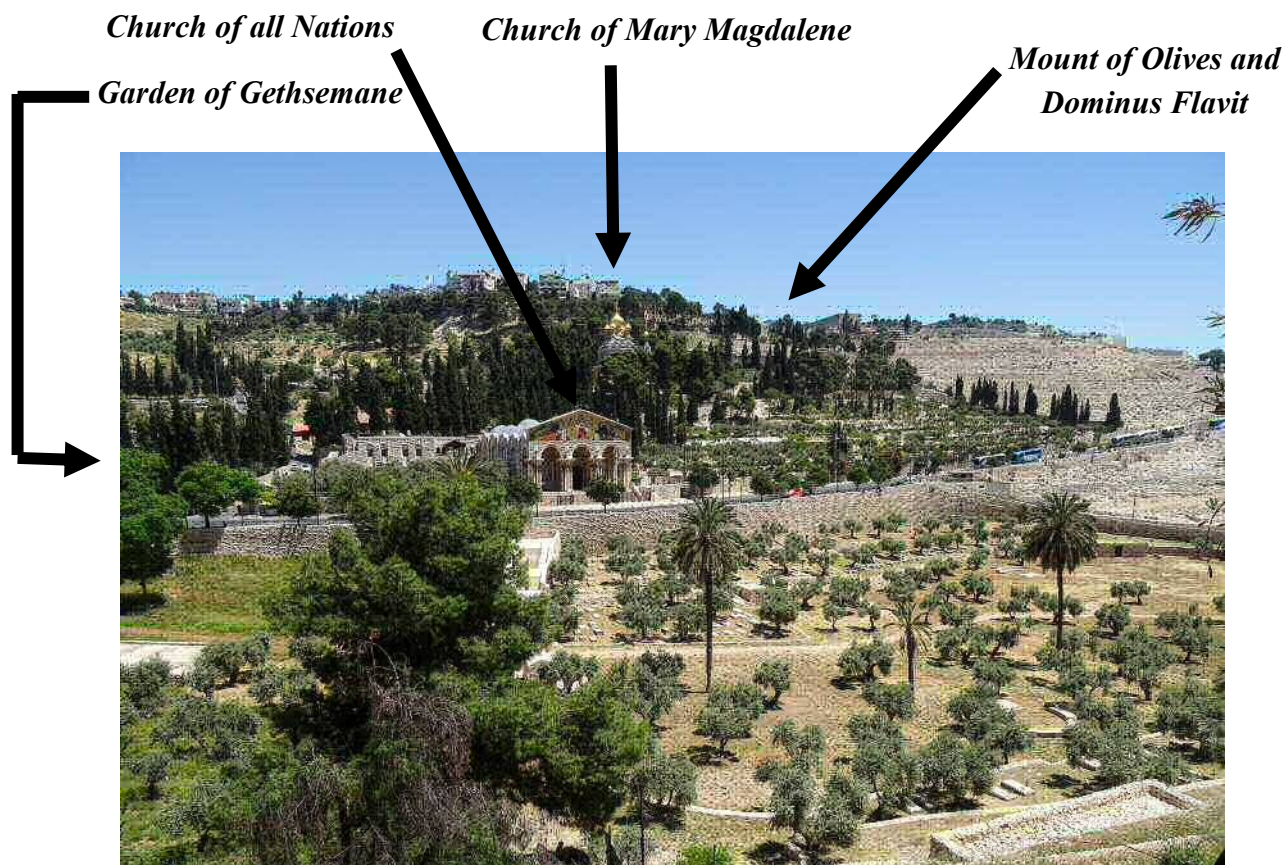
The church is also right next to the Bethesda Pools where Jesus commanded the man to "Take up thy bed and walk". As with so many sites, this one has had many sceptics over the years but there apparently is now good evidence of the pool's long existence and a good probability that the waters here featured in at least some of Jesus' travels. A church from the period of the Crusades also stands nearby, although that is no guarantee of authenticity as the Crusaders seem to have



found almost everything in this city and surrounding area to have had some Biblical significance.

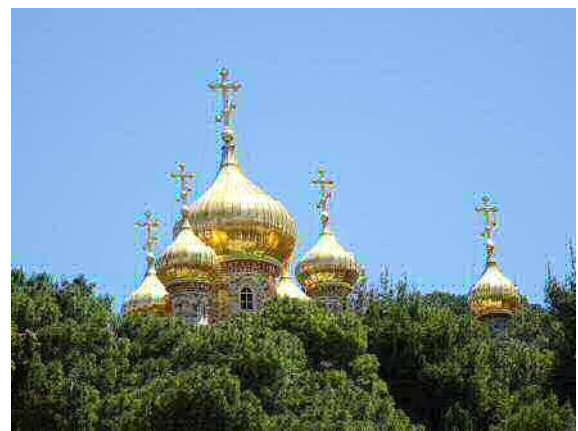


We then left the Old City via the Lion Gate and were just across the valley from the Mount of Olives and the Garden of Gethsemane, as well as being very close to the church built over the tomb of the Virgin Mary. We chose not to climb the Mount of Olives and were present at a time when the Garden and the other points of interest were closed for a couple of hours. (This somewhat random closing schedule seems to be a feature of Israeli sites and, although the guide books generally do a good job of identifying hours, it is often difficult to visit a series of sites without a wait).





So, we chose to stand beneath the City Walls below Temple Mount and simply gaze over the valley to the much greener hillside opposite. The cypress and olive trees, unpaved paths and little in the way of buildings other than churches provided a scene more like those imagined from Bible readings than perhaps most in the city.



***Molly in front of the Mount of Olives***

***The Church of All Nations (Left)***

***The Beautiful Onion-domed Church of Mary Magdalene (Above)***

The modern church stands on the foundations of two ancient churches: a 4th-century Byzantine basilica, destroyed by an earthquake in 746 and a 12th-century Crusader chapel, which was abandoned in 1345.

The Basilica of the Agony was built from **1919-24** with funding from 12 different countries, which gave it its alternative name: "the Church of All Nations."

*Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, Sit here while I go over there and pray. He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled.*

*Then he said to them, My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me."*

*Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."*

*--Matthew 26:36-39*

***At the base of the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem is a Crusader church said to mark the Tomb of the Virgin Mary.***





**Dominus Flevit Church** is a small Franciscan church located on the upper western slope of the **Mount of Olives** in Jerusalem.

According to **Luke 19:41**, "As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it" because "the days will come upon you when your enemies will... dash you to the ground." Dominus Flevit Church is believed to mark the place where Jesus' mourning over Jerusalem occurred. The current Dominus Flevit Church was constructed in **1954**; the church is in the shape of a **tear drop** to symbolize the Lord's tears.

The current church stands on the ruins of a **7th-century church**, some mosaics of which still remain. The western window in Dominus Flevit provides a beautiful view of the Temple Mount.



### *The Church of Dominus Flevit, the Mount of Olives and the Church of Mary Magdalene*

In addition to the sites across the small valley, there is a vast archeological site just beneath the walls and a huge cemetery claiming tombs of many Old Testament figures. There are also tunnels attributed to King Hezekiah (approximately 8<sup>th</sup> century BC) which were built to prepare for a siege on the City of David expected from the Assyrians and mentioned in the Second Book of Kings.



So we were once again quite literally overlooking perhaps three thousand years of history in an area that had experienced many facets of peace, war and conflict as depicted in the Old and New Testaments. Perhaps underscoring this and bringing it right up-



to-date, we could also see atop the Mount of Olives the concrete wall dividing Jerusalem from the Palestinian West Bank as well as one of the Israeli settlements that have been built just across that wall, causing further recent unrest.

*The Wall with the  
West Bank behind it*



We re-entered the Old City at the Dung Gate and made our way to the end of the line waiting to enter Temple Mount. This area, which accounts for about 1/8 the area of the Old City and is bounded on the west by the Wailing Wall, is under Muslim control. Once again, it is open only a few hours each day to non-Muslims, partly to facilitate prayer at the Dome of the Rock (a gold domed icon of the Muslim faith in Jerusalem) and the Al Aqsa mosque and partly as an aid to crowd control in (as one of our fellow visitors said) “the most volatile site on earth”

Unfortunately we were not to enter this potentially volatile area as, after about 40 minutes standing in the hot sun, the 2:30 closing time came and the gate was abruptly and forcibly closed and the remaining line was forced to disburse – to try again some other time. Once again, we were close (and perhaps that is the main thing we needed) but it certainly would have been a privilege to get closer to what had been the site of the Second Temple of Jerusalem, once more built by King Herod. It is the temple that Jesus would have visited and at which he taught, as well as turning over the tables of the money changers. It is of paramount importance to Christians and Jews as well as being the third holiest site of the Muslim Faith – and yet today it is illegal (under Israeli law) for Jews to pray on Temple Mount and impossible for others, such as ourselves, to carry a Bible into this site. It is perhaps little wonder that it is a volatile area!



After being turned away and starting our slow walk back through the town, or perhaps searching for a place in the shade for a light lunch, Molly suddenly was overcome by the heat and the tiring walk and almost blacked out. We found a place for her to sit in the shade while I went in search of a taxi to take us back to the hotel. This took some time – and a long circular drive with me alone in the taxi – before we were re-united and taken back to the air-conditioned comfort of the hotel. We rested a while, had a sandwich lunch around 3pm and Molly then slept and recovered.

We had planned to eat at a nearby restaurant on this our last night in Jerusalem but found out that ALL restaurants (outside hotels) were closed this evening in commemoration of the Holocaust. So, our final evening meal on this trip to Jerusalem was the buffet in the hotel dining room. There was a good selection of hot and cold food and, with a bottle of local wine, we enjoyed dinner, which we followed with an espresso sitting in the lounge bar.



### Monday April 28

We had our usual breakfast in the hotel and then packed for departure to Tel Aviv. We had decided to travel by taxi, which we had arranged to pick us up at 11:30. Consequently, we had over an hour of time to relax before checking out.

At 10am the sirens in the city sounded in commemoration of the Holocaust. We had read that this would happen (so there was no sudden panic!) and that it is normally followed by a period of one minute silence and cessation of traffic movement. Being in the room with no view of the street we could not confirm either but the event was just another reminder of the struggles that this nation and its people have endured – and how they (unlike so many other countries, it seems) continue to honor that fight.

Our taxi arrived a few minutes early and in a little over an hour we were checking in at the Renaissance Hotel on the waterfront of Tel Aviv. We visited the lounge to have a light snack and then settled down for a relaxing afternoon in the hope of giving Molly sufficient time to completely recover from yesterday's episode.

Late in the afternoon I took a two mile walk along the sea front under clear blue skies. There was a gentle breeze from the Mediterranean and it was not particularly humid so the walk was very pleasant. Almost the entire promenade here is lined with high rise hotels and, although some are across the road from the promenade, all seem to have their own little stretch of beach which even on a late April Monday afternoon were quite well occupied.

Tonight we chose to eat in the hotel restaurant which overlooks the promenade and the water. It was a buffet meal but with an excellent salad and a good selection of hot foods and desserts. With a bottle of wine and an espresso in the lounge to finish, we had a good start to our four nights in Tel Aviv.



*Tel Aviv waterfront from our hotel*

### Tuesday April 29

We were up soon after six to get a bite to eat before leaving on our day tour to the north of Tel Aviv. We left with the blue Mediterranean on our left side and drove to our first stop at the ancient city of Caesarea.



### *Caesarea on the Mediterranean Coast*

Caesarea was built by King Herod in honor of Caesar Augustus. Apparently Augustus and Marc Anthony were vying for the next role of Caesar and Herod saw that Anthony was busy in Egypt with Cleopatra and bet on Augustus, building this town just to give the new ruler an appropriate place to land from Rome. It is right on the sea shore and has a good selection of ruins that give an appreciation for its size and amenities.



There is a 4000 seat amphitheater, a huge stadium (only recently excavated and with its long terraces of seats intact) and the usual palatial rooms with mosaic floors, etc. There were, however, very few statues as ornamentation, as Jews then (and now) have only geometric shapes to adorn their buildings. Herod was not a Jew by birth (although he did marry a Jewish woman) but he was smart enough to know how to handle not only his Roman leaders but also the people over whom he had virtually supreme power.



### *King Herod's tribute to Caesar Augustus*

From Caesarea we drove to Haifa which is the third largest city in Israel and its major port. In fact there were two cruise ships and a Cunard liner (Queen Elizabeth) docked as we drove by. The main attraction on this tour, however, was to climb (in the bus) Mt Carmel for a magnificent panoramic view over city and the Mediterranean.

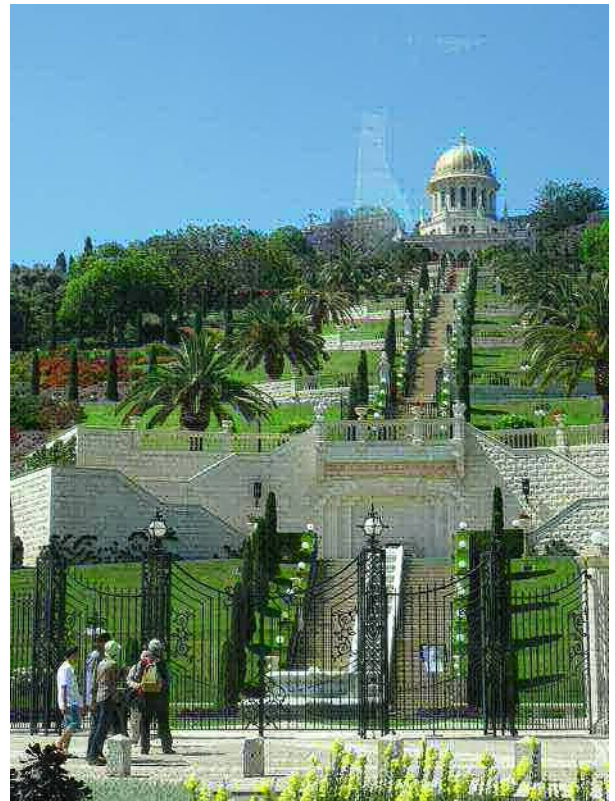




### ***Haifa: Major Sea Port of Israel and popular stop for Cruise Ships***

Although Mt Carmel is mentioned in the Bible, most notably in context with Elijah, it is not clear that the place we visited would have been that referenced in the Book of Kings. What is certain, however, is that this mountain range is of significance to Jews, Christians and Muslims and actually gave its name to the Roman Catholic religious order. But perhaps of most significance – and certainly the most beautiful sight from this vantage point - was the shrine of the Bab where the remains of the founder of the Baha'i Faith are buried, having been brought from his native Persia (Iran). The Baha'i Faith began in Persia the 19<sup>th</sup> century but was forced out for its teachings, and the founder was imprisoned for the final 24 years of his life.

The gardens and the shrine are built on two sets of terraces, each of nine levels (nine is of divine significance in this faith) and the view from this Mt Carmel lookout is magnificent. Built in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and beautifully restored and renovated (at a reputed cost of \$250 million) in the past decade, it must be one of the most stunning hillside complexes anywhere, whether viewed from above or below.



Unfortunately we could marvel at it for only a few minutes before continuing our journey north to the Crusader fortifications at Acre.



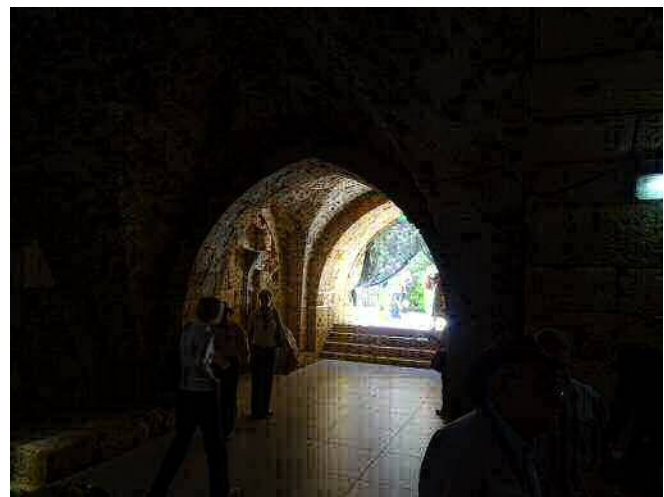
As we have seen in a number of locations (most recently in Jerusalem but most notably in Malta some years ago), the Crusaders built their temples and forts on a massive scale. This one has the usual extremely high and thick walls but additionally has the Mediterranean as a further barrier to attack. We visited huge underground rooms where the armies



### *Acre/Akko Crusader City*



Old Akko is an historic walled port-city with continuous settlement from the Phoenician period. The remains of the Crusader town, dating from 1104 to 1291, lie almost intact, both above and below today's street level, providing an exceptional picture of the layout and structures of the capital of the medieval Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem. The present city is characteristic of a fortified Ottoman town dating from the 18th and 19th Centuries, with typical urban components such as the Citadel, Mosques, khans, and Baths.





drilled (out of sight so as not to give away their methods and size) and we even followed subterranean water passages which could also have acted as an evacuation route.



For two hundred years the Crusaders from all over Europe attempted (generally successfully) to return this part of the Middle East to Christianity after almost a thousand years of Muslim takeover. Muslim leadership was regained partly through wars (with this fortress at Acre being one of the final siege losses) and partly as a result of a lack of unity amongst the various Catholic Church factions that had mounted the Crusades. In any event, by 1400 the Holy Land was under Muslim control and remained so until the formation of the State of Israel in 1948.

*Time for a rest in the shade before driving further north*

Our final stop for the day was at the limestone grottos of Rosh Hanikra, at the extreme northern edge of Israel. These grottos, worn by the Mediterranean into a series of white caves with amazingly blue waters, are approached by a short cable car ride that takes the visitor to just above sea level from the cliffs above. From here there is a ¼ mile walkway, with several side passages, that provides views of the grottos and sounds of the sea and wind, much like their more famous cousins on the Isle of Capri off Italy.



*The Grottos of  
Hanikra*





On returning to the road via the cable car, we were instructed to turn left and within a few feet (quite literally) we were at the border with Lebanon. Actually, much like the border between Greek and Turkish Cyprus, this is actually two borders with an intermediate UN controlled buffer zone, so the army controlling this gate was in fact that of Israel. Presumably a similar Lebanese force was located a few hundred yards away but there was no way we were going to be allowed to peer through to find out and photography was strictly forbidden. At this point we were 100Km from Beirut (and over 200Km from Jerusalem!



This is the third such “de-militarized zone” boundary that we have seen; the others were the Cyprus one mentioned above and at the North Korea-South Korea border. This makes one wonder how many more there might be in this somewhat unstable world. On the other hand, we have been reminded several times during this brief visit to Israel that the very convoluted (and often volatile) areas of this small country do have an underpinning of peaceful co-existence. Many Jewish-Palestinian neighborhoods and whole towns have been identified for us as we have driven

across the country and certainly we have witnessed no obvious animosity and a generally tranquility in this clearly multi-cultural land. For me, this is yet another benefit to traveling to such regions: friendliness and cooperation seems to prevail and it is the times of strife and conflict that are rare – but make the headlines.



During the Second World War the British dug a railway tunnel 250 meters long and built a bridge, as part of the Haifa - Beirut - Tripoli railway track.

This was done to connect the local and Lebanese rail networks and to establish a continuous rail route from Egypt via Sinai, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria and Turkey to Europe for troops and supplies.

The bridge and tunnels were all constructed by engineering units of the British Army from South Africa and New Zealand. The building of the system took about one year and it was opened for passengers and freight rail traffic in 1942.

Part of the Ha'apala (Illegal immigration) fleeing from the Nazis made use of this tunnel to find haven in The Land of Israel. In 1947, the British decided to open a civilian passenger service on this line, but this decision was never implemented.

At the end of 1947, the Israeli War of Independence broke out and the Western Galilee was cut off from the rest of the country. It was feared that Arab forces would use the railway route to bring volunteers and arms from Lebanon to aid their forces in Haifa so a sabotage entered the tunnel and blew up the western end of the Bridge.

After the withdraw all of the British Police force, the area came under Israeli control.



From the border (and the now disused entrance to a railway tunnel—see inset) it was a direct drive back to Tel Aviv where we arrived around 5pm. This gave us ample time to rest and clean up and then set out to dinner. We had intended to go to a recommended restaurant in the Sheraton hotel right next to ours but saw a pleasant-looking outdoor restaurant across the street. We took a quick look at the menu and decided to give it a try. We were not disappointed and enjoyed an excellent meal with excellent service, all sitting outside overlooking the now dark Mediterranean.

### Wednesday April 29

We were up early again to start our day long tour of the Galilee region at 7:20. We drove in a north-easterly direction which climbed east of the Carmel range and across the Armageddon Plain. Armageddon is mentioned in the Book of Revelation and has an apocalyptic connotation but the Hebrew words mean simply Strong Mountain. Being at a strategic point on many ancient trade routes, this area has seen many battles and a number of cities built and destroyed. We were told that a small hill is actually a site on which several cities had once existed, each built above its predecessor (presumably destroyed or abandoned). Whether or not this spot (mentioned frequently in the Old Testament as Meggido) will be the scene of a literal or symbolic apocalypse, it is today set in a beautiful region of Israel, not unlike northern Italy.



### Revelation 16:16

*Then they gathered the kings together to the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon.*

*Megiddo is mentioned twelve times in the Old Testament, ten times in reference to the ancient city of Megiddo, and twice with reference to the plain of Megiddo,"most probably simply meaning the plain next to the city."None of these passages describes the city of Megiddo as being associated with any particular prophetic beliefs. The one New Testament reference to the city of Armageddon found in Revelation 16:16 in fact also makes no specific mention of any armies being predicted to one day gather in this city. Based on the earlier passage of Revelation 16:14, however, the text implies that the purpose of this gathering of kings in the place called Armageddon is for the war of the great day of God, the Almighty." Because of the seemingly highly symbolic and even cryptic language of this one New Testament passage, some Christian scholars conclude that Mount Armageddon must be an idealized location, particularly as there are no mountains here at Megiddo.*



On this stretch of road, which changes from mountain pass to deep valley rather frequently, we caught several views of Mount Tabor, a 2000 feet unusually rounded hill believed by many to be the site of the Transfiguration of Jesus. Both Roman Catholic and Orthodox monasteries have been built atop this mountain, but these were not on our agenda today.



### *Matthew 17*

## *The Transfiguration*

*17 After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. <sup>2</sup> There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light.*

Instead, our first stop was in the city of Nazareth. The city is built on a steep hillside and, since the time of the British Mandate for Palestine after World War I, has grown to a population of around 200,000 people following two thousand years as a village not too dissimilar to that of Jesus' day. Today it houses the Church of the Annunciation and the Church of St Joseph, both built on the presumed sites of Mary's and Joseph's homes



### *Nazareth on the hillside and the Church of the Annunciation.*

*The Church (Basilica) of the Annunciation* is a particularly attractive and tranquil sanctuary, especially when compared





with the frenetic chaos inside the Bethlehem nativity site.



The cave-like home is on the entry level to the church and has a simple altar and a peaceful ambiance. The modern church above is relatively simple but quite beautiful and the walls are adorned with mosaics of the Virgin donated by Churches from around the globe. Perhaps one of the most impressive is one donated by Japan, although many are very elaborate and impressive.



*Luke 1:26-27*

*<sup>26</sup> And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth,*

*<sup>27</sup> To a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary.*





The Church of St Joseph is more modest but has excavations that reveal a site that could have been either the home or the carpentry – or, since the Crusaders had also built on this site – neither. Once again we were conscious of the fact that two thousand years have elapsed and that it was perhaps four hundred years before anyone tried to identify specific sites in the first centuries of Christianity. It is not surprising, therefore, that there could be confusion as to the exact locations of any Biblical site. We were nevertheless in Nazareth and the fact that we may or may not have seen the exact place of Joseph's shop (or indeed any "true" location) was of little consequence. This was not the interpretation of many of our fellow visitors who chose to accept these small caves or ancient stones as a truly Holy site and acted with due reverence. It must also be said that there was the other extreme in tourists who seemed more intent on being photographed (sometimes in glamor magazine fashion) in front of these sites than in any religious, historical or cultural experience.



*The Church of St Joseph  
with his home below  
(bottom right)*



As

we left the two churches, we walked through modern Nazareth, passing a street market and noting church and mosque in one view: a town with a Muslim majority and a Christian mayor— in a Jewish State.



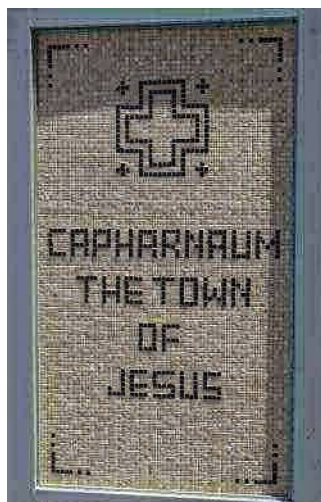


From Nazareth we passed through rich farmland and saw several modern towns as we descended to catch our first glimpse of the Sea of Galilee.



We passed through the village of Cana, where water was turned into wine to prolong the festivities at the Wedding Feast. We also saw the city of Tiberias which had been built by one of the two sons of Herod the Great in honor of the Roman Emperor and is one of Judaism's four Holy Cities, and the one where the Talmud was composed. Our guide suggested that it was probably not visited by Jesus, perhaps due to its Rome connections but more likely as it was a town of Judea where the new teachings would not have been well-received. It should be noted, however, that the Sea of Galilee is often referred to as the sea of Tiberias so there is room for further confusion and doubt.

We were now at the Sea of Galilee, which is 600 feet below sea level, below that of Death Valley in the USA but significantly higher than the Dead Sea to the south. Our first stop on the side of the lake (it is only 64 square miles) was at the Church of the Multiplication of Fish and Loaves where Five Thousand were fed. The church here is also very peaceful and simple and the only feature relating it to the event is a rock marking the site of the miracle, covered by a simple altar.



Not far from this Miracle Site is the Town of Capernaum, commonly referred to as the Town of Jesus.

Capernaum is cited in the Gospel of Luke and the Gospel of John where it was reported to have been near the hometown of the apostles Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John, as well as the tax collector Matthew. One Sabbath, Jesus taught in the synagogue in Capernaum and healed a man who had the spirit of an unclean devil. Afterwards, he healed a fever in Simon Peter's mother-in-law. According to Luke 7:1–10, it is also the place where a Roman Centurion asked Jesus to heal his servant. Capernaum is also mentioned in the Gospel of Mark (2:1) as the location of the famous healing of the paralytic lowered through the roof to reach Jesus. According to the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus selected this town as the center of his public ministry in the Galilee after he left the small mountainous hamlet of Nazareth (Matthew 4:12–17).



Capernaum was actually the home of St Peter and it is thought that Jesus stayed with him, although again this is the subject of considerable debate. A church has been built here over the site of the home and in this case it has been done without destroying the archeological site below by simply placing the church on legs that straddle the old buildings. Very close by is a synagogue (actually two – one built directly on the foundations of the earlier one) where Jesus might have taught.

The area around the Sea of Galilee is part of an enormous rift in the earth which stretches from Syria to Central Africa and which has created both Galilee and the Dead Sea. It is an area prone to earthquakes and much of the ground is covered with dark basalt rock, in stark contrast to most of the rest of Israel which is white limestone. Hence, the old synagogue base here is black whereas its replacement is of the more familiar white limestone. The latter was built in the fifth century so it would have been the darker building that Jesus would have visited.



**TOP: Capernaum Synagogue Old (Dark basalt stone, where Jesus may have preached) and New (New—4th Century AD!)**

**BOTTOM: Synagogue ruins with some obvious Roman influence and view of church built over Peter's (and Jesus') home.**







A beautiful statue of St Peter sits in a pleasant courtyard overlooking the Sea of Galilee and – in the absence of tourists wishing to be seated at its base for the inevitable photograph – provides a very attractive scene. With the odd fishing boat out on the Lake, one could easily imagine it as a scene that Jesus Himself would have recognized as much of His ministry was centered in this area.



*Lunch stop alongside the Sea of Galilee*



### ***The River Jordan north of the Sea of Galilee and the Golan Heights***

We then drove around the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee, having crossed the Jordan River at its point of entry. We were then at the base of the Golan Heights, an area that has seen much conflict and one which was taken by Israel from Syria in the 1967 Six Day War. This, a large section of Jordan west of the Jordan River (The West Bank) and the Gaza Strip were each brought into the State of Israel as a result of that short but one-sided war against Syria, Jordan and Egypt.

The results of that war and the Yom Kippur War that followed six years later pushed out the northern and eastern boundaries of Israel by 15 to 20 miles. However, as with most situations in this country, it is not that simple. As we noted earlier, the West Bank has areas controlled by Israel, by the Palestinian Authority and by the two jointly. The whole area is considered to be “Occupied” by Israel but, unlike the Golan Heights, has not been annexed. The Gaza is recognized as part of the State of Palestine by the United Nations, as is much of the West Bank.

As a consequence of these differences in “ownership”, people living in the Golan Heights are now Israeli citizens, whereas most in the West Bank are Palestinian and do not carry Israeli citizenship and, indeed, Israelis are not permitted to enter the Palestinian areas – by Israeli (not Palestinian) law.

Military service is still a part of youth life for Israelis with a three year term for men and two years for women being the norm. Although “compulsory”, only about 50% actually serve with many being excused on religious and other grounds.



More important, however, is the fact that non-Jews in any part of the country (occupied, annexed or sanctioned) are not required to serve. Muslims and Christians can, and a number do, but there is no obligation.

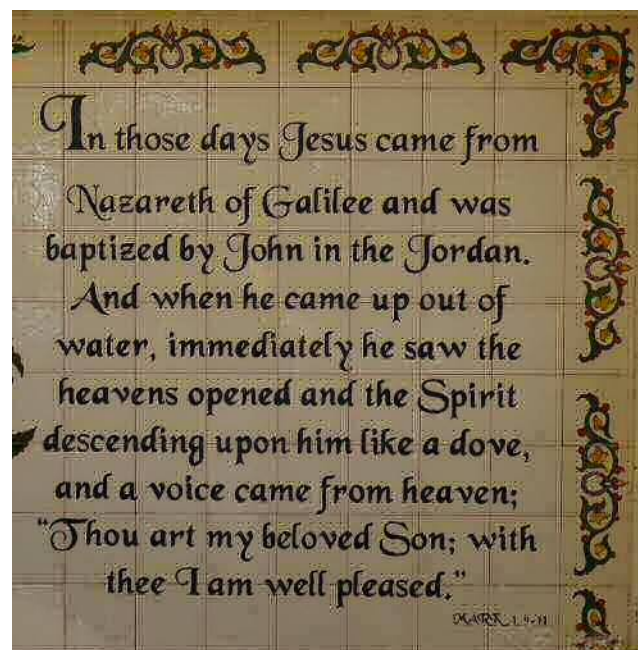
*The Golan Heights and the Sea of Galilee seen from the western shore, with its rich farmland*



The drive along the eastern shore, in this annexed region of the Golan Heights, was very attractive and the hills to the east and north were again very reminiscent of northern Italy. At first glance it appeared that the hillsides we could see were unoccupied but closer inspection revealed dozens of villages and towns, filled with new Israeli citizens! A fellow tourist who joined the group later had spent the day on those hills and he said that it was a very beautiful area.

In fact, the whole of the northern part of the country that we had visited during these two days was very attractive and totally different from the rocky desert of the area of Jerusalem and to its east. The valleys and hillsides were well irrigated (desalination is becoming more important in this country as the population increases and the rainfall is generally slight) and provide much of the food for the country. Agriculture is the second largest industry, behind high technology and ahead of diamond cutting! It would appear that Tourism must be pushing each of these based on the numbers of buses we had seen.

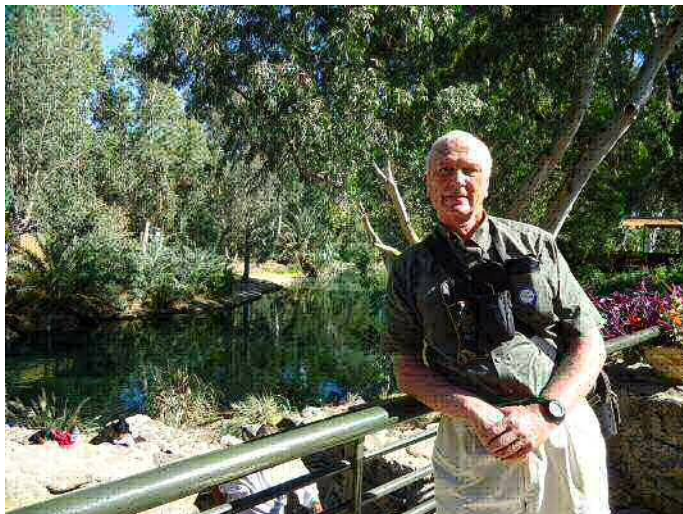
At the southern end of the Sea of Galilee we crossed the Jordan River to the west and made our final stop for the day at the Baptism Site. This is a well-organized and commercial site that may or





may not be the place where John the Baptist baptized Jesus, but it does sit on the western bank of the Jordan River, is close to Jericho and has been designated as such for those who wish to accept. When I mentioned to our guide that we had visited “the Baptism Site” on the other side of the river and further south in Jordan, he simply responded that no-one claimed this as the one true place. (He had not made such a statement to the larger group, however). The site we had visited several years ago was not actually “in” the river, although not more than a few yards from the slowly flowing water. An early church (perhaps First Century) had been built at that site in Jordan; no such “statement of authenticity” had been made here.

However, this site in Israel was actually on the River Jordan and areas had been prepared and surrounded by railings so that those inclined could be baptized in safety and, with the aid of a robe available from the gift shop for \$25, in relative modesty. Although there were a number of obvious church groups here and some may well have had ordained ministers to perform the ceremony, it would appear that immersion baptisms here were mostly self-imposed or performed by friends or family. It is not for those like us, who simply chose to watch, to challenge neither the authenticity nor its impact on those who actually participated.



Following this visit it was time to leave the hot valley (high temperature for the day was almost 100F) and take the two hour drive back to Tel Aviv. The climb out of the river valley was steep and had spectacular views of the River Jordan and the Sea of Galilee and much of the rest of the way was through the fertile plains and modest hills of Central Israel. We arrived back at the hotel almost exactly 12 hours after we had left, tired but so pleased that we had taken this tour “In the Footsteps of Jesus”.

There was just enough time for a quick shower and change before dinner. We walked to the restaurant in the Sheraton to find it completely empty but in a good location overlooking the Mediterranean. However, we were soon disappointed in the ability to provide a chilled bottle of wine and with the service in general that we left and walked back to the same small restaurant where we had enjoyed our meal last night. Here we were greeted like old friends and were soon found a table outside where we enjoyed another great meal in superb surroundings.

*“Our” Restaurant for two nights in Tel Aviv (as seen from our hotel balcony)*





### Thursday May 1

We had no tour plans for today so we slept late (9:30), had a very leisurely breakfast and read newspapers in the lounge, and then took a stroll along the promenade. Our only mission was to relax, have a coffee and watch the sunbathing world – and to check out a recommended restaurant for dinner. This we did, made a reservation for 8pm and then relaxed for the rest of the day to “wind down” after a hectic but moving eight days in this wonderful country.

Dinner at Raphael was more expensive than that of the previous two nights but nevertheless was a very good meal in pleasant surroundings overlooking the sea. It had a clientele from diverse parts of the world (the four at the next table to us were French) which we feel always adds to the dining experience.



### Friday May 2

We were up at eight, had breakfast in the lounge and packed ready for our short trip to the airport at 10:30. Check-in, Security and Passport Control were each simple procedures and certainly no more invasive or unpleasant than any airport in the US. The airport seemed to be very quiet, particularly in our departure terminal, and we were able to do a leisurely last minute shop and have a snack in the El Al Lounge prior to our 2:15 flight to London.

This concluded a wonderful visit to The Holy Land which exceeded our expectations and completely changed our prior images of the Biblical sites in so many respects. The people, history and culture were diverse, interesting and amazing and we felt privileged to have been given the opportunity to experience them in this first—hopefully not the last—visit to Israel.







## *Appendix: Impressions of Israel*

It is a small country (about 8000 square miles, presumably depending somewhat on exactly how you measure this country of many disputed areas) – about one fifth the size of Ohio. We crossed its 60 mile width in the north four times during our stay and traveled about 2/3 of its north-south length.

It is generally very clean, has an excellent (and rapidly growing) infrastructure and is technologically very advanced. It has a population of just over 8 million (up from 2 million in 1960) and much of its recent growth has come as a result of the breakup of the Soviet Union.

It is said that Israel has one of the highest poverty rates of Developed Countries but we saw little evidence of that in the places we visited during our brief stay. In the two large cities of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv we saw no “street people” or beggars and, although there was always someone ready to make a quick sale at any tourist site, the “pushiness” was far less than that we have experienced in many countries.

Israel is defined as a Democratic Jewish State but provides freedom of religion under its laws. About 75% of the population is Jewish, 20% Muslim and 3% Christian. These percentages change dramatically if the “disputed areas” of the West Bank and Gaza are included, to the point where the Muslim population would be about 40%. Anyone can apply for Israeli citizenship, regardless of religious affiliation, but preferential treatment is given to those who fall within the mandate of the Law of Return – Jews who wish to “return” to “their” country.

Despite the almost continuous threat of conflict and the inevitable disputes over territory, we encountered no obvious animosity between peoples of different religions and certainly everyone was very pleasant to us as tourists. Officials at the airport were efficient and courteous although did not enter



into conversation any more than was necessary to do their job.

We were very surprised at the low level of police and/or military presence in any part of the country, except when we visited the border with Lebanon. We had expected to see a lot of heavily armed personnel, particularly in the packed tourist areas and at the West Bank borders but there was little to differentiate those places from many others throughout the world. Although there is apparently a significant drug and arms trafficking business in Israel, “street crime” is very low and we were given no specific warnings (as we have been in several other countries) other than the usual “watch your purse or wallet” in high density areas.

Although essentially a desert, the country does have a huge agricultural area thanks to a good irrigation scheme. This is made possible by rainfall on the higher grounds and, increasingly, through the use of desalination plants. The central plains are a lush source for many vegetable, fruit and grain crops and the wine industry is growing at a rapid pace. Driving across the cultivated areas it is clear why the country was labeled the Land of Milk and Honey in the Old Testament. It is a far more mountainous (although not very high) and beautiful country than I had imagined which presented a nice bonus to its main attraction of the Biblical sites.

We found Israel to be relatively expensive based on our view as tourists. Certainly hotel costs are at “Major City” prices and dining is probably 50 to 100% higher than in the US. I think even Europeans would feel it more expensive than what they are used to. On the other hand, the food is excellent and there is a good variety of meats (except pork), and vegetables and the salads are wonderful. Hummus is plentiful, of course, and the breads are varied and excellent. We also enjoyed the local wines.

It is a wonderful country to visit and certainly sits high on our list of favorites.



## ***Map of Israel and its Neighboring Countries***

***Most of the places we visited are shown  
as are the disputed areas of the West Bank and Gaza***



