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The First Day



MOUNT ARBEL

• NAZARETH

MOUNT CARMEL •

CAESAREA •

• MEGIDDO

BEN GURION AIRPORT



The Theater at Caesarea

Caesarea:

The City Built on Sand

After a long flight—with little sleep but several movies—our planeload of pilgrims finally lands in Israel. Some tour groups head immediately to Jerusalem, but our plan is to drive north along the coast toward Galilee, saving Jerusalem until the end of the trip. After a short night's rest, our first stop is Caesarea, the seaside city built by Herod the Great.

THE EXCITEMENT OF THE FIRST STOP

As the bus stops at the entrance, excited tourists grab their hats and cell-phones, adjust the headsets to their listening devices, and walk into the site. The guide tries to lead everyone toward the theater, but the tourists seem to scatter in all directions, snapping soon-to-be-forgotten pictures of every nondescript rock and broken statue. The wayward lambs finally enter the seaside theater and gaze in awe at their first authentic “ancient ruin” rising up from the surrounding sands.

Though restored by archaeologists—and used today for musical performances—the theater retains the well-worn look of a structure that has faced the Mediterranean Sea for twenty centuries. The scarred and pocked sandstone hints at the storms that have lashed it through the years. For the jet-lagged tourists their initial drowsiness gives way to a sense of excitement. But this emotional reaction is *not* from the height, or grandeur, or intricate workmanship of this theater. Rather, it comes from being face-to-face with the first

visible, tangible link to the past. This is the group's first gateway back to the time of the Bible.

The tourists suddenly realize that Herod the Great might have walked across the same stones they are now treading, his hands could have brushed against the very walls they are touching. The remains of Herod's palace—the very palace where the apostle Paul was imprisoned for two years—stands a scant few hundred yards away. Before the group leaves Caesarea they will also visit the hippodrome, where chariot races were held, the ancient harbor—built by Herod and later rebuilt by the Crusaders—and the Roman aqueduct that brought water from Mount Carmel, six miles away.

One of the guide's many responsibilities on the tour is to keep the group moving. They want to slow down, breathe in the history, and populate the ruins with people from the Bible—Herod the Great, Herod Agrippa I, Peter, Cornelius, Philip the evangelist, Paul, Felix, Festus, and Herod Agrippa II. But the guide knows all the other sites the group must cover during this day. Like the White Rabbit in Walt Disney's *Alice in Wonderland*, they are all but shouting, "We're late, we're late! For a very important date! No time to say 'hello, good-bye,' we're late, we're late, we're late!"



The hippodrome next to Herod's palace

For most visitors to Caesarea, walking through the ruins is emotionally impactful, the first of many such experiences during the trip. But those who are able to look beyond the impressive ruins—and who aren't distracted by the guide's impatience—will sometimes spot the fatal flaw in Herod the Great's grand design for Caesarea. The city's foundations didn't rest on solid rock like

that in the hills off to the east. Instead, the city spread out along the shifting sands of the Mediterranean coast. Herod's original harbor is gone . . . sunk beneath the sea. The aqueduct that brought Caesarea its life-giving water now stands in majestic isolation from the rest of the city. The aqueduct's northern edge disappeared beneath the sand that has relentlessly reclaimed its territory, and its southern end has been torn away by the Mediterranean—leaving a gap between the aqueduct and the city it was built to serve. Vast parts of the ancient city itself still remain covered by sand.



Remains of the Roman aqueduct

What Herod thought was permanent was only temporary. The city—named after Caesar, built with Roman technology, and intended as a monument to Herod's greatness—couldn't endure. The buildings may have been grand, but their foundations were supported by nothing more than shifting sand.

Leaving the theater, the group passes through a small forest of pillars and

sarcophagi on its way to Herod's palace. The palace itself juts out into the Mediterranean, along with a freshwater pool extending out into the sea—perhaps the world's first infinity pool. On the north side of the palace, the group walks in the foundations of the assembly hall built by Herod the Great to receive important visitors. This is almost certainly the room where the apostle Paul stood before Festus and Agrippa. In Acts 25, Luke reported that Agrippa and his wife entered the auditorium “with great pomp, accompanied by military officers and prominent men of the city” (v. 23). Imagine the scene. Rome's provincial governor entertaining royalty, the grandson of King Herod, along with all the prominent citizens of Caesarea.

And then Paul was led into the assembly hall, the iron chains on his wrists and ankles clanking and scraping across the mosaic floor. To those gathered in the room, Paul must have seemed little more than a common prisoner brought in to satisfy the curiosity of this visiting dignitary.

But when Paul was invited to speak, the scene changed. Paul shared his personal testimony, including his encounter with the resurrected Jesus of Nazareth. But Paul wasn't done. Speaking directly to these leaders who thought they held his life in their hands, Paul presented the claims of Jesus and called on them to respond to *Him*. Jesus was to “suffer and be the first to rise from the dead, and in this way announce God's light to Jews and Gentiles alike”



The site of Herod's palace and assembly hall

(Acts 26:23). Agrippa the Jew and Festus the Gentile understood that Paul was speaking directly to them!

Festus cried out, “Paul, you are insane. Too much study has made you crazy!” (Acts 26:24). But Paul wouldn’t back down. “I am not insane, Most Excellent Festus. What I am saying is the sober truth” (v. 25). And then pointing to King Agrippa he said, “King Agrippa knows about these things. I speak boldly, for I am sure these events are all familiar to him, for they were not done in a corner! King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do” (vv. 26–27).

Agrippa interrupted Paul and responded, somewhat defensively, “Do you think you can persuade me to become a Christian so quickly?” But Paul refused to be silenced. “Whether quickly or not, I pray to God that both you and everyone here in this audience might become the same as I am, except for these chains” (vv. 28–29).

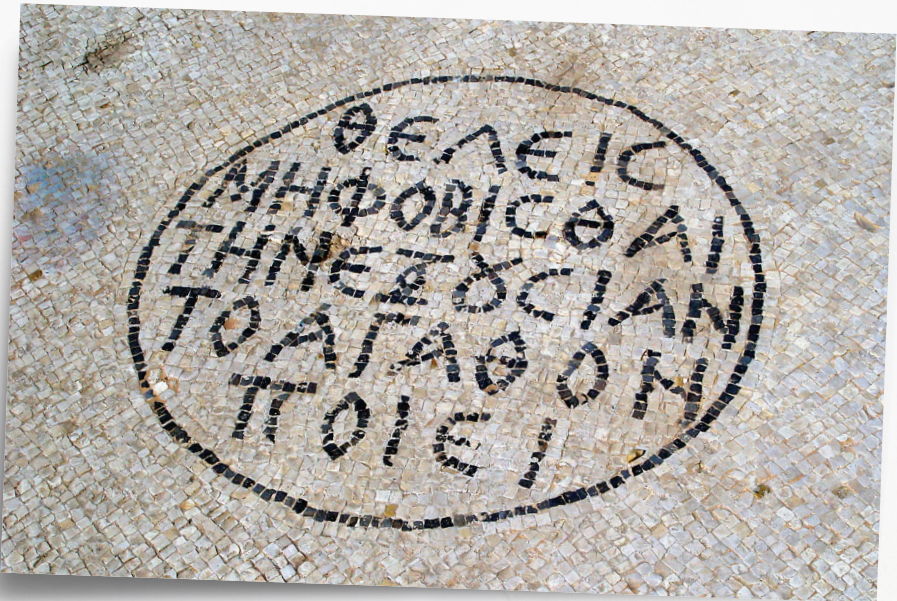
The apostle Paul passed through Caesarea, his two-year imprisonment likely little more than a footnote in the ledgers of the Roman rulers who governed Judea from here. But the mission to which Paul had committed his life was not built on shifting sand. It was anchored on the solid rock of Jesus. Paul himself reminded the church at Corinth of this truth. “For no one can lay any foundation other than the one we already have—Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 3:11).

Paul’s words raise an important question for any group about to begin its journey through the Holy Land. In what should we place our trust? It’s the same question that some who listened to Paul’s message two thousand years ago must have asked themselves. They could see the visible might of Rome. Could such might and power somehow be less significant than the promise of salvation offered through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ? To many in Paul’s day, such a choice must have seemed absurd. The Roman ruler of Caesarea, after hearing Paul’s impassioned message, cried out, “Paul, you are insane” (Acts 26:24). He could see the impressive buildings already standing, hear the clank of hammers hitting chisels to fashion still more monuments to Rome’s greatness. To Festus, *this* was reality. How could Paul believe that the power of God through Jesus Christ was greater than this?

Two millennia have passed since these men met in this very audience hall in Caesarea. Only fragments of the palace remain. The city built to honor the name of Caesar—and promote the greatness of Herod—is nothing more than an archaeological curiosity. Worn, weathered, world-weary. But the message announced by the apostle Paul has spread with power around the globe. That’s an important lesson to carry from this first stop on this journey through the land!

FUN WITH SEMINARY STUDENTS

I love beginning a tour at Caesarea. Unfortunately, the extensive archaeology and amazing work of preservation have taken away the ability to pull a practical joke on guests. Before much of the restoration had been completed, parts of the excavation were reburied beneath the sand to prevent damage or looting. On some of my early trips with seminary students we would take them on a walk between Herod’s palace and the harbor area. At one key spot we would stop and say, “Imagine what else might be buried here in the sand, right under our feet!” And then we would begin scraping the sand away with our feet.



Mosaic with quotation of Romans 13:3

As Greek letters started coming into view, the students would get excited and drop to their knees to help brush away more sand. Soon the group had uncovered an entire inscription. And then the budding Greek scholars would translate, with a little help from the professors, “Would you like to live without fear of the authorities? Do what is right, and they will honor you.” Why, that’s a direct quotation of Romans 13:3!

And indeed it was. This Byzantine-era inscription, one of two actually, was discovered on the floor of a large public building. The inscription is now completely uncovered, but the “joy of discovery”—and the practical joke—are forever gone!

Take some time to explore on your own. Make sure to get all your pictures. And don’t forget to use the restrooms on your way back to the bus. But don’t dawdle! The bus will be leaving in fifteen minutes. “We’re late, we’re late, we’re late!”



Looking out over the Jezreel Valley from the top of Mount Carmel

Mount Carmel:

Elijah's Mountaintop Experience

The road to the summit of Mount Carmel—the traditional site of Elijah's contest with the prophets of Baal—is paved, but fairly narrow. Two small cars can pass one another going in opposite directions without difficulty, but not two tour buses. Thankfully, there are multiple spots along the road where one bus can ease over to the side, allowing another to squeeze by. Passengers learn to appreciate the skilled drivers who pass within mere inches of each other while keeping their side mirrors unscathed.

The road to the top of Mount Carmel wasn't always so nice. On my early trips to Israel there were places where the road was barely wide enough for one bus. If two buses met unexpectedly at one of those narrow spots, one was forced to back up until the driver could pull to the side and allow the other to squeeze by. I never heard any reports of accidents on that road, but I'm sure the experience tested the nerves of new drivers.

The road finally snakes its way up to a monastery on one of the tallest peaks of the Mount Carmel range. The monastery is named Muhraqa, which in Arabic means “place of burning” or “place of the fire.” It was built by the Discalced Carmelite Order. Of course, the average visitor to the Holy Land has never used the word “discalced” in a normal conversation, which shows how this trip can add greatly to one's vocabulary. The word comes from the Latin word for shoes—*calceare*. To be “discalced” was to be without shoes! Somehow the word never caught on with most people, probably to Shoeless

Joe Jackson's everlasting relief. Thankfully, pilgrims today can keep their shoes on at the site. There's no need to be shoeless on Mount Carmel!

Some guides don't like bringing their groups to Muhraqa. It's an out-of-the-way drive to reach the site, and apart from the monastery's tiny gift shop there are no stores in the immediate vicinity. Tourists seldom realize that many stores offer guides and drivers a commission for bringing their busloads of tourists in to shop. Some less-than-honorable guides would prefer to skip sites like Muhraqa to give their people more time for shopping at "my friend's very special olive wood shop" in Nazareth.

I was once leading a group in Israel at the same time as my brother-in-law. After our tours, we remained in Israel and had a few free days to do some exploring on our own. As we talked about our most recent trips, he mentioned how sad it was that the road up to Muhraqa had been washed out. "But I was just there with our group. The road wasn't washed out," I said.

Over the years my brother-in-law led several other tours to Israel, but he never used that guide again!

After paying the entry fee, the guide leads the group across a plaza toward the main building. Some stop to take a picture of the statue of Elijah who is glaring menacingly down at them, sword in hand, threatening to slay any remaining prophets of Baal who might be hidden among the group. On reaching



Statue of Elijah on Mount Carmel

the building, the pilgrims climb a set of stairs to the rooftop viewing platform for a spectacular view of the Jezreel Valley.

I love Mount Carmel, in part, because of this grand view. On most days the Jezreel Valley is covered in a light blanket of haze, but a visitor can still see enough to appreciate the strategic significance of this valley, also known as the Valley of Esdraelon or the Valley of Armageddon. This rooftop perch helps a person visualize how much history God has packed into such a small country. The modern state of Israel has conveniently built a military airfield in the valley, and its two runways form a giant V that can be used to help orient the group geographically. The left runway is pointing toward a ridge that has a town on top. The ridge is the Nazareth Ridge, and the town is the modern city of Nof HaGalil (“the Galilee View”). The original city of Nazareth is right next to it, and it’s hard to tell the two apart from here. People can mentally place Jesus, Joseph, and Mary on that hill.

The same runway is also pointing to a rounded hill sticking up just *behind* the Nazareth Ridge. That’s Mount Tabor. A later tradition associates this mountain with the Transfiguration, though Mount Hermon is a better candidate for that event. But two spiritual giants from the Old Testament *did* stand on the summit of this mountain—Deborah and Barak. Mount Tabor is the mountain in Judges 4–5 where they led an army of ten thousand Israelites against the chariots of Canaanite general Sisera.

The right runway is pointing to still another hill, the Hill of Moreh. The name doesn’t bring a glimmer of recognition to most in the group until they populate the hill with other notable characters from the Bible. At the base of the hill is the modern town of Afula. It’s the location of the Old Testament town of Ophrah—the hometown of Gideon! On the right (south) side of the hill was the Old Testament town of Shunem. Elisha stopped off at the home of a Shunammite woman and announced she would give birth to a son (2 Kings 4). Later, Elisha raised that child to life following the boy’s tragic death.

On the left (north) side of the hill was a town from New Testament times called Nain. In Luke 7 Jesus raised back to life a son belonging to a widow

from Nain. The people responded by saying, “A mighty prophet has risen among us” (Luke 7:16). Why did they respond to this miracle by calling Jesus a prophet? Perhaps because the greatest miracle that ever took place in the area happened just three miles away, on the other side of the hill, when the prophet Elisha raised that young boy to life!

From the hill where Jesus grew up, to the hill where Deborah and Barak led Israel in a great victory, to a hill where two young boys were raised from the dead—by Elisha and Jesus. And we’re not yet done with this visual sweep of history. Just to the right of the Hill of Moreh, off in the distance, is Mount Gilboa. That’s the hill where Gideon chose his three hundred men to defeat the Midianites, where Saul and his sons died fighting the Philistines, and where Ahab and Jezebel built a palace . . . and a man named Naboth refused to sell them his nearby vineyard.

Thirteen hundred years of Bible history unfold in the valley below. And we haven’t included the hill on which we’re now standing! Mount Carmel is actually a range that extends for twenty-four miles. Below us in the valley our tourists can just make out a green ribbon of vegetation that marks the twisting course of the Kishon River—really nothing more than a small rivulet for most of the year. Somewhere on this hill is where Elijah fought his contest with the prophets of Baal and the prophets of Asherah, and way down there at the Kishon is where Elijah had the people put these false prophets to death.

Today, groups wearing headsets are able to spread out along the railing here on the monastery roof and take in the panorama while Bible teachers speak into a microphone. But in earlier days, groups needed to huddle together around the teacher if they wanted to hear. This was especially true if there were multiple groups sharing the rooftop at the same time.

On one occasion, I had just started speaking when a large group came up on the roof. I motioned to our party to gather around me in the corner. I told them I would need to talk softly because I didn’t want to disturb the other group. Meanwhile that group began to huddle in the center of the roof around a hand-drawn compass showing the direction to various sites. I didn’t

know exactly what the leader was saying, but at one point he must have described the fire that fell from the sky following Elijah's prayer. He evidently associated it with the "cloven tongues of fire" that fell in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, because the group suddenly came alive with wild shouts and ecstatic utterances! Thankfully, no physical fire fell from the cloudless sky that day, and no prophets of Baal wandered onto the roof.

On most occasions the weather on Mount Carmel has been nice, though somewhat hazy, for our late morning visit. When sharing the story of Elijah's encounter with the prophets of Baal, I usually focus on the drought. I want the group to imagine what it would have looked like when, after a three-and-a-half-year drought, a cloud no larger than a human fist finally appeared to the west, over the Mediterranean. Sometimes there will even be a cloud that I can use as an illustration. But there was one time on Mount Carmel when I had to focus on the downpour rather than the drought!

It was early spring, and the weather had been threatening all morning. But as we neared the top of Mount Carmel, the heavens let loose. We learned later that up to eight inches of rain fell on Mount Carmel that day, causing severe flooding in Haifa. We sat on the bus for a short time waiting to see if the storm would end. It didn't, so I retold the story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal, focusing on the great storm God sent after the contest. The rain was so heavy we couldn't even see the monastery from the parking lot, less than a hundred yards away. The people all knew the story, but the special effects were spectacular.

There's much Bible history that can be seen from the summit of Carmel, but there are also some profound lessons every visitor should carry away from the site. The first is the reminder that the events in the Bible are real events that took place in real locations and impacted the lives of real people. The tangibility of those stories makes a profound impression on most visitors. A second lesson is the reminder that anyone choosing to stand with God need

The events in the Bible are real events that took place in real locations and impacted the lives of real people.

not fear the opposition. Whether it's Elijah, Deborah and Barak, or Gideon, the victory came when faithful men and women chose to follow and obey Him. And finally, we need to drive off this mountain with a caution. Whenever we have what some describe as a "mountaintop experience," like the one Elijah had here on Mount Carmel, no matter which way we head, we need to be prepared to face the spiritual valley that inevitably follows. Elijah's mountaintop in 1 Kings 18 was followed by his fearful flight into the wilderness just one chapter later. Life is a series of spiritual peaks and valleys. Enjoy the peaks, but always remain prepared for the valleys. Just ask Elijah!



Remains of Bronze Age gate at Megiddo

Megiddo:

The Site of Armageddon

Walking across the site of ancient Megiddo is a good early test of a group's physical abilities. The previous sites only involved relatively short walks, but the hike across the summit of Megiddo is more taxing. It's longer. It requires walking over some irregular ground. And it ends by descending 180 steps into the town's water tunnel, followed by a climb of eighty steps to get back out.

The group is ready to take a short break by the time we reach the first stop, the Late Bronze Age city gate. This gate was in use when Joshua led the children of Israel into the promised land, and it helps explain why Israel failed to occupy the land fully. In fact, Megiddo is specifically singled out in this regard. "The tribe of Manasseh failed to drive out the people living in . . . Megiddo, and all their surrounding settlements, because the Canaanites were determined to stay in that region" (Judg. 1:27). Standing by this gate, that makes great sense. The defenses would have looked quite imposing to a group of desert nomads. That doesn't *excuse* Manasseh's failure, but it does help explain it.

During Mark Twain's visit to the Holy Land, he stood at ancient Megiddo and reflected on all the armies that had gathered in the Jezreel Valley over history.

The Plain of Esdraelon—"the battlefield of the nations"—only sets one to dreaming of Joshua and Benhadad and Saul and Gideon; Tamerlane, Tancred, Coeur de Lion, and Saladin; the warrior kings of Persia, Egypt's heroes, and

Napoleon—for they all fought here. If the magic of the moonlight could summon from the graves of forgotten centuries and many lands the countless myriads that have battled on this wide, far-reaching floor, and array them in the thousand strange costumes of their hundred nationalities, and send the vast host sweeping down the plain, splendid with plumes and banners, and glittering lances, I could stay here an age to see the phantom pageant.¹

Until someone has visited Israel, Megiddo and the Jezreel Valley are simply names from the Bible with little historical significance. Yet for those like Twain, who've stood on the summit and gazed out across the valley, the strategic location becomes clear. To the west, the valley reaches to the Mediterranean at modern-day Haifa, and to the east it connects with the Jordan Valley. Near where we're standing, the International Highway passed by Megiddo connecting the two great civilizations of Egypt and Mesopotamia. A parade of cars and trucks can still be seen traveling along the modern road that follows the pathway used by the Egyptian army 3,500 years ago.

Carl Rasmussen has described the Jezreel Valley as “the stage on which the armies of the world have made their entrances and exits.”² And certainly that's what Mark Twain must have had in mind as he stared out over the same vista. The spot where we're standing, the hill of Megiddo, has more than just *historical* significance. The word “hill” in Hebrew is *har*, and in the book of Revelation *har Megiddo* gets transliterated as *Armageddon*. Its very name points to a still-future gathering of armies at this site.

When most hear the word Armageddon they think of the final battle of the ages, the ultimate spot where good will triumph over evil. But as we stand here I want our group to walk off the site with a slightly different perspective. To me, the hill of Megiddo marks the spot where evil—at least temporarily—seems to triumph over good. To understand why I say this, we need to visit Megiddo on two separate occasions.

The first visit takes place near the end of the kingdom of Judah. Judah's last good king, Josiah, ruled on the throne, but the dark clouds of war were

gathering on the horizon. To the northeast, Assyria and Babylon were fighting for control over Mesopotamia. The once-great Assyrian empire was on the ropes. The army of Babylon had already destroyed the city of Nineveh and was advancing to attack what was left of the Assyrian forces. To Josiah's southwest, Egypt was on the rise, hoping to benefit from this power struggle. The mighty army of Egypt began marching north to rescue the Assyrian army, stop the Babylonians, and expand its power and influence along the way.

Good King Josiah saw the Egyptian advance as a mortal threat to his kingdom. Though the Egyptians marched up the International Highway and away from Jerusalem, Josiah mobilized his army and rushed north to stop them at the only spot where his smaller force might have a strategic advantage—at Megiddo. He hoped to bottle up the Egyptian army in the narrow pass nearby that carved its way through Mount Carmel.

Josiah's ill-fated military campaign ultimately cost him his life. The Bible describes the encounter this way: "King Josiah and his army marched out to fight him, but King Neco killed him when they met at Megiddo. Josiah's officers took his body back in a chariot from Megiddo to Jerusalem and buried him in his own tomb" (2 Kings 23:29–30). Megiddo is the spot where Josiah lost his life, and the kingdom of Judah lost its independence.

If this first stop at Megiddo takes us back in time 2,600 years, the second takes us to a time that's still future—a time when it seems as if all the world will fall under the control of Satan and the forces of evil.

What many call the "battle of Armageddon" is not actually described as a battle in the Bible. The book of Revelation pictures it as a staging area for the armies of the world. Satan, the Antichrist, and his false prophet send their demonic emissaries into all the world "to gather them for battle against the Lord on that great judgment day of God the Almighty . . . And the demonic spirits gathered all the rulers and their armies to a place with the Hebrew name *Armageddon*" (Rev. 16:14, 16). Armageddon is the *gathering place*, the spot where the armies join forces for their final campaign against Israel . . . and eventually against God Himself.

Megiddo represents the high-water mark of Satan's plan for global conquest. The armies of the world ultimately unite behind his false messiah at Megiddo for a series of military campaigns that will end in Jerusalem. But just when victory seems within his grasp, Jesus will descend from heaven to the Mount of Olives to destroy the invaders and rescue His followers. An army that appears unstoppable when it gathers at Megiddo will ultimately be vanquished by the true King and Messiah when He returns from heaven.

Knowing how the story ends gives our band of pilgrims a different perspective as we get ready to continue our exploration of Megiddo. Directly behind where we're standing, archaeologists uncovered a large altar built from fieldstones. Though we're looking down at the altar, it was once the "high place" for those living here just before the time of Abraham.

One of my most unique memories from Megiddo is of a time when we weren't able to go up on the site. Clouds had skittered across the sky all morning, threatening rain. For a while we had been fortunate, but that all changed as our bus rolled into the parking lot. The clouds opened up and a driving rain soaked the group as we ran to the building entrance. While waiting for the rain to stop, we used the indoor model to explain the details of the site. It was still raining, so we sent the group to the restrooms. Little did we know that our time at the site was just about over.

As the group started gathering near the pathway to walk up on the site, we saw a stream of water rushing down toward the building. Within just a few minutes the pathway was completely flooded, the water several inches deep. And the rain hadn't slowed down one bit. We waited a few more minutes, but it became obvious that we wouldn't be able to go up on the site without becoming completely soaked. We finally gave up and ran back to the bus.

As we drove toward the Sea of Galilee and our hotel, we passed Mount Tabor. The bus splashed through deep puddles on the road while we talked about how God enabled Deborah and Barak to defeat the forces of Sisera by sending a massive rainstorm at just the right moment. No one in the bus had any doubts such a storm could turn fields into a quagmire and make the chariots



Canaanite altar discovered at Megiddo

useless as the iron-rimmed wheels sank into the mud. The group never got to see Megiddo, but they also never forgot the story of Deborah and Barak!

HIKING ACROSS MEGIDDO

The overlook at Megiddo is a wonderful spot to talk about the role Megiddo plays in history and in prophecy, but it's also an excellent spot to rehearse the key hills that frame the Jezreel Valley—Mount Carmel, the Nazareth Ridge, Mount Tabor, the Hill of Moreh, and Mount Gilboa are all clearly visible from this overlook. (Well, as long as it's not raining!) Next to the overlook is a cut taken from the ancient hill—the archaeological equivalent of taking a slice out of a layer cake. And in one of those remarkable accidents of discovery, the archaeologists just happened to pick a spot where there was a Canaanite altar—a high place made of rounded stones.

As we begin our trek across the top of the hill, we come to a spot where the

less mobile “sheep” can separate from the more sure-footed “goats.” And as if to follow Jesus’ command in Matthew 25, the sheep head off to the right for a downhill walk back to the Visitor Center where the bus is waiting. The sure-footed goats take the pathway to the left heading across the rest of the site.



Grain storage silo built into the ground



Stone manger with sculpture of a horse

After stopping at a large grain storage silo dug into the ground, we reach the stables. During the time of King Ahab, these held the horses that pulled Israel's chariots. But what's perhaps even more interesting for our group are the stone mangers. Some are ancient, and some are new. These new ones were added, along with the artistic horses, to help visualize the ancient ruins.

Those mangers also help bring the story of Jesus' birth into sharper focus. Most churches have some sort of manger or crèche that they bring out at Christmas. The manger is usually made of wood and stuffed with straw, into which is placed the blond-haired, blue-eyed Jesus. But while a manger made of wood might look nice, it would have been quickly gnawed to bits by hungry animals. A more logical choice for a manger was the limestone that formed the backbone of the hill country. It was cheap, plentiful, and durable. Once it had been chiseled into shape it would last indefinitely. Here at Megiddo are 2,600-year-old mangers still holding their shape.

Of course, I haven't yet had any churches adopt my suggestion.

The final destination on our journey across Megiddo is the tour of the water tunnel. Walking down more than 180 steps is difficult for anyone with knee problems. But imagine how difficult it would have been before the modern OSHA-approved, seven-inch steps were installed. The original steps were carved from limestone, varied in height, and were usually wet and slippery from the water spilled from the jars of the women who were carrying them up from the spring.

At the bottom of the steps is the passageway carved through bedrock. The builders needed to get the depth, direction, and distance just right to have the tunnel end just below the original spring. Then they diverted the spring so that it flowed down into the tunnel. Finally, they blocked off all outside access to the spring so no enemy would know the location of this secret entrance into the city.

The cool dampness inside the tunnel is a welcome relief on a warm day.

A manger made out of wood may look nice, but it would have been quickly gnawed to bits by hungry animals.



The water tunnel at Megiddo

Unfortunately, the tunnel ends all too soon, and we now have to climb the equivalent of eight flights of stairs to exit the water system. If our timing is right, the bus *should* be waiting for us at the end of the pathway. One more site checked off our itinerary!



Looking down into Nazareth from the Mount of Precipice

Nazareth:

Jesus' Hometown

In Jesus' day, Nazareth was a tiny village with just a few hundred residents. Like many of the small towns scattered throughout the hills of Judea and Galilee, it was remote and hard to reach. Few outsiders would ever go out of their way to reach the village. Nathanael's words echoed the common sentiment of the day: "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" (John 1:46).

Though Nazareth was less than five miles as the crow flies from the International Highway that connected Egypt to Mesopotamia, a visitor had to climb a steep ridge to reach the town. After making it to the top of the hill, the would-be visitor discovered that the village itself was situated in a natural depression just below the top of the ridge. It was nestled in this bowl because that's where a natural spring—the town's water supply—was located. Nazareth was just a small village hidden away on top of the hill. The Old Testament passes by without a single reference to Nazareth. And even though it was Jesus' hometown, it's still only mentioned seventeen times in the New Testament.

But because of its association with Jesus, Nazareth became a major pilgrim stop and tourist destination. Over time, the town also grew in size. By the 1950s, Nazareth had nearly 20,000 inhabitants. Today, the town has grown to over 80,000 people. But the same two-lane road that snaked its way through the small village is still the main route through the center of town. The busloads of tourists arriving to visit the churches, shrines, and stores of Nazareth must work their way along this narrow road that is choked with cars, delivery

vans, street vendors, and shops selling genuine hand-carved olive wood and religious souvenirs.

The best place to view Nazareth today is from the Mount of Precipice, a spot on the edge of the hill. Standing here and looking down at Nazareth, it's easy to see the natural bowl in which the town started. The gray, cone-shaped roof of the Basilica of Annunciation is located at the bottom of the bowl in the center of town. From this vantage point we can also see why Nazareth today is a victim of its own success. The original road to the town twisted its way up the hillside from the Jezreel Valley before descending into the bowl and through the center of town on its journey north.

THE RIOT IN NAZARETH

Here on the Mount of Precipice we can also look down into the Jezreel Valley and see the new highway that tunnels its way through the rock, making the ascent to the top much easier than it was a few decades ago. But as the group looks down at the valley and roadway below, the story of Jesus returning to Nazareth in Luke 4 also comes into clearer focus. Jesus had returned to



Looking down into the Jezreel Valley from the Mount of Precipice

Nazareth and was invited to read and expound the Scriptures in the synagogue. The people appreciated the hometown boy until He began talking about Elijah and Elisha and their ministries to Gentiles. Luke records the chaotic end to this synagogue service. “When they heard this, the people in the synagogue were furious. Jumping up, they mobbed him and forced him to the edge of the hill on which the town was built. They intended to push him over the cliff” (Luke 4:28–29).

Turn and look back at Nazareth. The Basilica is about a mile away. Then turn and look down the side of the steep cliff toward the Jezreel Valley. The worshipers in the synagogue that Sabbath day were so angry they pushed Jesus out of the synagogue . . . and out of the village . . . and all the way out to the edge of the cliff where we’re now standing. And then they planned to shove Him off the side of the cliff! The words in Luke 4 take on greater force and impact when you understand how far the people were willing to go to show their rejection of Jesus’ ministry.

The words in Luke 4 take on greater force and impact when you understand how far the people were willing to go to show their rejection of Jesus’ ministry.

WHAT SHALL WE VISIT?

For Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox pilgrims, no trip to the Holy Land would be complete without a visit to the Basilica of the Annunciation and the Virgin’s Fountain, along with several other holy sites. But many Protestant groups avoid the city because of all the traffic congestion. Historically, the Roman Catholic and Orthodox groups have sought to find the actual spot where events in the life of Christ took place, and then build a shrine and hold religious services there. Protestants are more interested in seeing the vistas and trying to imagine what the scene looked like when the events in the Bible took place.

Mark Twain noticed the difference and wrote about the grotto and basilica in Nazareth with his tongue firmly embedded in his cheek. “It is an imposture



Basilica of the Annunciation

—this grotto stuff—but it is one that all men ought to thank the Catholics for. Wherever they ferret out a lost locality made holy by some Scriptural event, they straightway build a massive—almost imperishable—church there, and preserve the memory of that locality for the gratification of future generations. If it had been left to Protestants to do this most worthy work, we would not even know where Jerusalem is to-day, and the man who could go and put his finger on Nazareth would be too wise for this world.”¹

Since this is a Protestant tour, the Protestant “holy site” in Nazareth is the Nazareth Village—and that’s our next destination. Nazareth Village is a



*Stonemason at work
in the Nazareth Village*

re-creation of what Nazareth might have been like in the time of Jesus. Tourists visit houses, a farm, and a synagogue set up as they would have looked during Jesus' day. Visitors can watch a farmer plowing his field with an iron-tipped plow, or see a carpenter crafting furnishings and tools, or view a stonemason chiseling a stone to be used in a building, or sit inside the replica of a first-century synagogue. This outdoor museum is a highlight for many because it allows them to visualize how Nazareth might have been in the time of Jesus.

WHERE ARE YOU FROM?

Nazareth Village also brings back memories of a special trip to Israel with my radio cohost. We were in Israel recording for a Moody Radio Christmas special. This type of trip is fairly intense. The two of us, along with our wives, traveled at breakneck speed through the land to record as many interviews and sounds as possible in the limited time we had. We somehow managed to schedule our visit to Nazareth Village at a time when there were no other groups. The director gave us a personal tour while we took time to record the sounds of bleating sheep, grain being winnowed, and olives being crushed in a press.

The highlight of our time there came when two young shepherds approached leading a small flock of sheep and goats. The older of the two appeared to be in his late teens or early twenties, and he watched with interest as we recorded. Finally, my cohost went over to see if he could speak with, and perhaps interview, this young shepherd.



*The Nazareth shepherd
from "Goshen"*

“WHERE–ARE–YOU–FROM?” he asked. He was very careful to speak slowly and to enunciate clearly, hoping the shepherd would have enough of a grasp of English to understand his question. The shepherd paused, looked carefully at my cohost, and then said, slowly and distinctly, “GO–SHEN, IN–DI–AN–A!” It turned out that he was an American college student doing a service project overseas!

That encounter was a great reminder that not everything in the Holy Land is what it might seem to be on the surface. And that’s a good lesson for every pilgrim to remember as they travel through the land hoping to somehow connect to the days of David, Elijah, and Jesus.



The Sea of Galilee from Mount Arbel

Mount Arbel:

Galilee's Scenic Panorama

Most pilgrims traveling to Israel have never heard of Mount Arbel. It's never mentioned in the Bible, and until fairly recently it wasn't included in most tours. Before being made into a National Park, the site could only be accessed by driving through an agricultural community and then hiking nearly a mile up a dirt road and rocky pathway. No food kiosk. No bathroom facilities. And almost no visitors. But for those who *did* hike up, the view was breathtaking.

During the rainy season, the dirt road could become a muddy quagmire. We hiked to the summit with one group of pastors only to discover that low clouds obscured all visibility. By the time we made it back to the bus, our hiking boots and sneakers were coated with red-tinted mud. Our driver made us take off our shoes before allowing us back onto his bus, and we spent most of the evening trying to scrape off thick clumps of *terra rosa* soil.

Walking to the top of Mount Arbel in the summer was almost as bad, especially when the hot afternoon sun beat down from a cloudless sky. A pilgrim on one of my earlier trips was convinced I was trying to kill her by taking her on a five-mile hike. In those early years I resorted to telling anyone who asked that the walk was “only three kilometers.” In reality the walk was about half that distance. But it didn't matter because most Americans can't visualize how far a kilometer really is.

The nearby *moshav*, the local farming co-op, saw a business opportunity

in the increasing number of buses driving through their community to walk up Mount Arbel. They purchased a herd of donkeys and offered to rent them to individuals wanting to ride to the top. The business didn't last too long because younger visitors wanted to walk while older visitors were afraid to ride.

And for good reason!

On one occasion, we saw an older rabbi rent a donkey so he could ride to the top while his pupils walked. But the small donkey wasn't happy carrying the portly rabbi. Partway up the hill the donkey bucked, and the unfortunate rabbi tumbled off, landing on his own backside. The young students had a good laugh at the rabbi's expense, and so did the group of foreigners following along behind.



Hiking to the top of Mount Arbel

Today, the walk to the top of Mount Arbel is much easier. Tourists can take advantage of restrooms, fill their water bottles from the fountain, and even buy an ice cream bar for a quick burst of energy. It's still an uphill walk, and the group quickly spreads out along the path. But those in front don't mind waiting because the view from the summit is so amazing.

MOUNT ARBEL'S UNFORGETTABLE VIEW

The moment a pilgrim reaches the summit of Mount Arbel, all thoughts of sore feet, burning lungs, or achy knees vanish. They're replaced with a view of the Sea of Galilee 1,250 feet below. And unlike the sloping pathway taken to reach the top, a sheer cliff provides a dramatic vista of nearly the entire lake. It's like viewing a giant 3D map of the sea in vivid color!



Looking down at the Sea of Galilee from Mount Arbel

Standing on the edge of the cliff, one can trace the life of Christ that unfolded along its shores. Just below are the ruins of Magdala, the hometown of a woman named Miriam. Miriam of Magdala—better known to most as Mary Magdalene. A little further up the shoreline is a group of red-roofed buildings. That's Tabgha, the spot where Jesus likely first called His disciples and then appeared again to them following the resurrection. The hill just behind it is the Mount of Beatitudes.

Continue following along the shore and you will spot the village of Nahum. The Hebrew word for village is *kephar*, so the town was known as Kephah Nahum. We know it in the Bible as Capernaum. A little beyond that is where the Jordan River enters the Sea of Galilee, and beyond that lie Bethsaida and Gergesa—the areas where Jesus fed the five thousand and where the swine ran down into the sea.

From this vantage point, tourists discover that most of Jesus' ministry took place in a small triangle-shaped area along the very northern tip of this small lake. The points of the triangle are the three cities in which the gospel writers say Jesus performed most of His miracles—Bethsaida, Chorazin, and Capernaum.

I love standing here on Mount Arbel because it reminds me of God's words in Isaiah 55:8. "My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts," says the LORD. "And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine." If *we* had been in charge of sending the Messiah, this is *not* where we would have sent Him. It's too small, too remote, too insignificant. We would have chosen Rome, or maybe Jerusalem. But *not* the northern shore of a small lake in Galilee.

Yet God did send Jesus to this out-of-the-way patch of the Roman Empire . . . to the district of Galilee . . . to an obscure corner of a freshwater lake in a region that even the Jews of Judea looked down on. What was God thinking? Again the words of Isaiah come to mind: "My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts."

Earlier in the book of Isaiah God let us know why He selected the very spot of land that lies below us now. Right after Jesus' forty-day temptation in the wilderness, Matthew writes, "When Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he left Judea and returned to Galilee. He went first to Nazareth, then left there and moved to Capernaum, beside the Sea of Galilee, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali. This fulfilled what God said through the prophet Isaiah" (Matt. 4:12–14). Matthew then quotes Isaiah 9:1–2. "Nevertheless, that time of darkness and despair will not go on forever. The land of Zebulun

and Naphtali will be humbled, but there will be a time in the future when Galilee of the Gentiles, which lies along the road that runs between the Jordan and the sea, will be filled with glory. The people who walk in darkness will see a great light. For those who live in a land of deep darkness, a light will shine.”

Jesus had to go to the land of Zebulun and Naphtali because God told Isaiah the prophet this would be the area He would honor. Now, most people don't know what area was promised to the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali. So pause for a moment and look at the maps in the back of your Bible. Or, if you're using an electronic Bible, then Google both names. Here's what you'll discover. The region around Nazareth was part of the area given to the tribe of Zebulun, and the northwest corner of the Sea of Galilee belonged to the tribe of Naphtali. Jesus went to the very area where God said the light of His Messiah would shine!

Isaiah actually tells us quite a bit about this predicted ministry. He says God had originally humbled the area, calling it “Galilee of the Gentiles.” By that he meant the area had come under God's judgment to the point where God allowed the Gentiles to dominate and control the region. In Isaiah's day, it was taken over and controlled by the Assyrians. In Jesus' day, it was the Romans. But it was Galilee “of” or “controlled by” or “belonging to” the Gentiles. Foreigners controlled the fate of God's people.

Isaiah also identifies Galilee with the Jordan River and “the sea.” You might never have thought about it, but to what “sea” was God referring? We usually think of the Mediterranean Sea, but Isaiah connects the sea with the Jordan River, and the tribal allotment of Zebulun and Naphtali. It's the Sea of Galilee! Isaiah announced that this was the place God would select to throw the switch on the floodlight of His glory.

One final time, look back down at the lake. Focus on that tiny triangle of land where Jesus performed so many of His miracles. What lesson

What lesson can we take away from this lofty perch overlooking a small lake in an out-of-the-way area in Galilee?

can we take away from this lofty perch overlooking a small lake in an out-of-the-way area in Galilee? Here's the lesson that strikes me with incredible force every time I come to this spot: *nothing is ever insignificant if God is in it*. All too often we're guilty of using the wrong yardstick to measure importance. We mistakenly assume that if something is bigger, and flashier, and more prominent, then it must be more significant. But think about Isaiah's prophecy. God chose this most insignificant area to do some of His most significant work. Jesus taught, healed, and fed multitudes here. He also gathered a small group of disciples here. And His ministry to that seemingly insignificant group of fishermen and tax collectors ultimately turned the world upside down.

MOUNT ARBEL'S UNMISTAKABLE PROFILE

Whenever possible, I want our group to visit Mount Arbel *before* they journey around the Sea of Galilee. Arbel provides a panorama that puts the individual sites around the Sea in perspective. Its vista gives pilgrims a visual framework in which to place the different locations. But it does one more thing. Mount Arbel's unmistakable profile provides a visual point of reference for us as we travel on and around the Sea of Galilee. It gives people a spot to which they can align the many sites they will soon visit. Just keep watching for Mount Arbel along the western shore.



A view of Mount Arbel from the Sea of Galilee

As groups are driving toward the Sea of Galilee, Mount Arbel is hidden. When the Sea of Galilee finally comes into view, I like to direct everyone's attention out the left side of the bus toward a tiny tree perched atop a small hill in the distance. For the next several minutes I keep pointing to the tiny tree to remind them it is our next stop—Mount Arbel! Let's just say most passengers are underwhelmed, and perhaps just a bit annoyed that I keep pointing to that tiny tree from every conceivable angle.

Once we get off the bus and start up the hill, I again point out the lone tree. But now I tell them our destination is just slightly beyond the tree. The tree is a carob tree—of “fake chocolate” fame—which produces pods like those fed to the pigs by the prodigal son in Jesus' parable. But that silly tree suddenly takes on new meaning when the group reaches the top of Mount Arbel. Many a tourist has had his or her picture taken beside that tiny carob tree!

Sadly, something happened to the tree. It's still there, but it's now only a shadow of its once beautiful self. I hope the tree recovers and thrives once



The lone carob tree atop Mount Arbel

more. It's a great visual marker to help people pinpoint the destination as they climb the back side of Mount Arbel. And once they've been on top, the tree also becomes a reference point, letting them know where they stood when they gazed out across the Sea of Galilee for the first time!

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