

Trip to the Holy Land March 3-17, 2001



Western Wall and Temple Mount in Jerusalem

During March of 2001, many of us from Peninsula Bible Church participated in a truly amazing tour of the Holy Land and a couple days in Jordan. It was led by Lambert Dolphin and Glenn Miller, who have posted an [itinerary of the trip](#) as well as some [amazing Biblical insights](#). Following is the story of my own experience in the Holy Land.

Sat-Sun March 3-4: Our long journey to the Holy Land starts! At last, after almost a year of planning and the trip already being postponed, almost canceled, we're on our way. We leave San Francisco, connect through Toronto to Tel Aviv. A beautiful tapestry welcomed us. We land around 6 at night the next day in Tel Aviv, and we make our way on the bus to Natanya along the Mediterranean coast.

Mon March 5: I actually got a decent night sleep the first night... a little jet lagged but not too bad. It was hard to believe that we had actually arrived and we were actually in Israel! It was a bit foggy the first morning... we could barely see the Mediterranean just outside our hotel past the seaside cliffs.

Our first stop for the day was Caesarea where we saw the ancient ruins of a Roman theater facing the Mediterranean, ruins of one of Herod's palaces and many marble and granite columns. Many of the arches were very well preserved - the Romans were great architects! We heard a little presentation and did a scripture reading about Caesarea while sitting on the original sandstone seats of the theater. We later toured some more of the ruins of the ancient city - the Hippodrome (the Roman circus), temples, houses, aqueducts, the harbor, lighthouse, and even some of the ancient sarcophagus (coffins). You could still read the engraved inscriptions in the stone. Beautiful spring flowers were sprouting among the ruins.

Lunch at the local Burger King - we couldn't get a whopper with cheese there (not kosher) so I had to settle without the cheese :-). There were quite a few soldiers there with their assault rifles... we learned to get used to that pretty quick! It scared us at first but we realized how safe we were with the soldiers protecting us everywhere! We drove up to Mt. Carmel - one of the holy mountains... up past vineyards, banana plantations, terraced fields, and houses on steep hillsides. We saw the coastal city of Haifa, its beautiful church, all the way down to the Mediterranean. It was quite a pretty city.

We visited the Church of the Enunciation (where the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary by the well), and we went through Cana - where Jesus changed water to wine. The church was so old that the

modern church was built on Crusader ruins, which were built on Byzantine ruins, about 1500 years old! Our final stop was Tiberias, on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. It was pretty warm there - we wanted to wear shorts but we all had to wear long pants in the churches!

Tue March 6: Another early morning wake up call... I didn't mind it though since I was so excited about what we were going to see each day! Breakfast was the usual again, buffet of fruit, bread, and fish. I thought it was unusual having fish with breakfast, but fish is a staple food... we had it with every meal. So was bread... all the meals had "fish and loaves"!

We visited one of the Kibbutz - one of the little farming communities along Galilee. We visited the "Jesus boat" unearthed just recently but found to be built around Jesus' time. It was amazingly well preserved in the mud under the Sea of Galilee, and quite representative of the kind of boats that Jesus would have traveled in 2000 years ago. On that theme, we took a boat ride on the Sea of Galilee up to Capernaum on the northern coast. It was another beautiful day in Israel, warm and sunny. The scenery was beautiful - the red poppies, yellow and purple wildflowers everywhere - beautiful church with the red domes - kind of a reminder that God created the land to be beautiful. The boat ride was quite pleasant, where we landed by the church of the Beatitudes - where Jesus taught the beatitudes in Matthew 5. We saw the ruins of Peter's house and where Jesus performed some of his miracles.

After lunch, we went down to the Jordan River, where many people get baptized. The water was quite cold this time of year... dipping my feet was enough... I'll get baptized next time :-). It was nice the place wasn't quite as crowded as usual - tourism was down 80% since the political situation started around September of last year. On our way back we stopped briefly by the Caprice diamond factory - one of the largest in the world - of the diamonds imported in the US, about 60% come from Caprice!

After dinner at the hotel, I got to show some people - Jeanette, Phyllis, and Joan - how to skip stones by the Sea of Galilee. It was very calm and peaceful, the full moon just rising. Quite a beautiful night.

Wed March 7: Breakfast again at the hotel - more fish and loaves. The fish was actually very good! Our first stop was in Tabgha at the church of the fish and the loaves - where Jesus broke the bread and fed the 5000 from 2 fish and 5 loaves of bread. We also visited Peter's church of the Primacy - where Jesus asked Peter 3 times if he really loved Jesus. It was right on the coast of the Sea of Galilee, built on the original rock that Jesus would have walked on. We heard another tour group singing "Holy Holy Holy" and "We are Standing on Holy Ground" - those songs started taking on a whole new meaning!

We started making our way up to Mount Hermon up north, by the Lebanon border. We visited the three headwaters of the Jordan River. The water was clear and cold, flowing from the snow-capped Mount Hermon just north. We passed one of the many "tels" or high places - some of which had 20-25 layers of ruins built one layer on top of another! We headed to Baniyas Cave by the mountain of the transfiguration of Christ. Ironically the cave had been used for large pagan sacrifices over the years. The Roman, Byzantine, and Crusader ruins were interesting.

We walked past many Muslim families having picnics and playing in the parks - it was their holy week so they had all those days off. We went to the Baniyas waterfall - magnificent roaring waterfall. The water was really flowing - it was where David wrote his psalm "As the deer pants for water so my soul longs after You". I just had to be careful not to get my camera wet as I was taking pictures of the rapids, the poppies and laurels.

Right before dinner a couple of us went to explore a tomb of an old rabbi - just up the road from our hotel - it was amazing how many old tombs and ruins were throughout Israel - many were within walking distance of the hotel!

Thur March 8: Our first stop was Mt. Tabor - it was a beautiful ride through the Jezreel valley past orchards, vineyards, barley and rye fields on our way. We had to take taxis up the steep hill - our bus couldn't handle the road - and I thought even our taxi wasn't going to make it in some places! We visited the church of where the transfiguration was thought to have taken place. It was one of Israel's largest, built on top of Roman and Crusader ruins - another example of a church that had been built and rebuilt many times. Glenn Miller did another one of the Scripture readings to give us a Biblical context and history of the site.

We later visited the town of Nein, where Jesus raised the widow's son. We visited one of the few churches in the area - it was a Muslim area with mosques everywhere but few churches. Some of us started singing and before you knew it we were all singing "How Great Thou Art" in 4 part harmony - the acoustics of this church as well as many others were incredible!

We visited the ruins of Megiddo - also known as Tel Megiddo or Har Megiddo (Armageddon). It was quite a spectacular site, an example of a city built and rebuilt 25 times - evidence from pottery, mosaics and other ruins found at different levels showed the city was once Egyptian, Canaanite, Roman, Byzantine, Crusader, you name it! It looked like a mountain from a distance, but was all man-made. The 2800 year old water tunnel was most impressive, cut out of the solid rock to give water to the city without people having to leave the security of the fortress to get water!

We stopped by An Harod on our way back, the cave where Gideon rounded up his 300 men and defeated the Midianites in Judges 6-7. It was amazing to imagine we were in the very spot where God worked this miracle... we just weren't ready to do the "drinking test" to see how we drank the water!

After dinner, several of us hiked up the trail behind the hotel and visited another site of ancient ruins - you can never be far from ancient ruins in Israel! It was a beautiful night, the full moon was just rising, the sun was setting, and we looked down from the top of the hill on the Sea of Galilee where we looked down on the beautiful lights of Tiberias. We could see the party boats all lit up in the lake - we could hear the music from them also! The ruins were pretty amazing too. We think they were from one of Herod's palaces - maybe the place where John the Baptist was beheaded. There were columns, mosaics, even a stone door that still swings! When we got back from the ruins we visited one of the natural salt-water hot springs in Tiberias. The water was so nice and warm and the jets soothed our legs nicely after the hike up the hill!

Fri March 9: Early wake up - we had a big day ahead of us. Our first stop was Bet Shean. It was quite spectacular, one of the largest ruins we had seen yet. It was an entire Roman city, part of the Decapolis. There was a pretty well preserved Roman theater, hippodrome, cardo, bath houses with mosaics floors, and a tel with about 20 layers of ruins. It was quite interesting that the first ruins of the hippodrome discovered were in somebody's back yard!

We made our way down the Jordan river valley into the desert region before we started climbing the hill up to Jerusalem. We passed Jericho in the Judean wilderness - it was the only city we wanted to visit that was closed - there were soldiers with assault rifles guarding the entrances. The city had actually been closed for months before also, so it wasn't anything unusual. We saw the Mount of Temptation from a distance. We didn't have time for a visit as we headed up the hill to Bethlehem. We

passed many Beduin camps and their tents and herds of sheep and goats on the hillsides. They led very simple subsistence types of lives, just living off the land. It kind of made us take a second look at our lives when we think of all the things we "need".

We visited Bethlehem - fortunately the Palestinian controlled town was open. We went to the church of the Nativity, saw the cave where the original manger scene is believed to have taken place and saw the spot where Jesus was born. We sang a couple Christmas carols - wrong time but right place - "O Come All Ye Faithful" sounded different than I could have imagined as we sang it! I even got to play some carols on my little flute that one of the vendors pushed so hard on me to buy that he almost paid me to take it away!

We arrived in Jerusalem at our hotel finally. The sabbath was starting as the sun was setting. It was easy to tell - all the Jews in their yamakas getting ready to head out to synagogue. There wasn't much to do tonight since about everything was closed. We had to take caution about the "Shabbat elevator" which went real slow and stopped at every floor so Jews didn't have to "work" to push the button for their floor!

Sat March 10: For the sabbath, we decided to head out to the desert - we visited places that wouldn't be closed for Shabbat. We headed down through the Judean wilderness again on our way down to the Dead Sea. Our first stop was En Gedi, the waterfall that David stayed by when he was fleeing from Saul. It was quite a beautiful sight, a spring with the waterfall amidst desert canyons like those of the Grand Canyon.

We spent most of the afternoon at Masada, the desert fortress invaded by the Romans in 70 AD where all the Israelites chose to commit mass suicide! Three of us hiked up the couple thousand steps to the top - most opted for the cable car. The hike was an adventure, stairs winding up higher as we made it to the top - the views were spectacular! The ruins were amazing, bath houses with mosaic floors, synagogues even with mosaic walls, towers, houses, pieces of pottery everywhere. You could still see the siege ramp the Romans had built, as well as ruins of the many encampments surrounding the city.

We made a quick stop at Qumran, the place where as Beduin herder looking for a stray animal stumbled into the cave containing the Dead Sea scrolls. The caves were clearly visible and many ruins of the city were preserved. We did our lunch there also - the usual falafel, pita, and humus. Unfortunately most of the sites at Qumran were closed because of the sabbath, so we decided to head to the Dead Sea for a quick beach trip.

We headed to a beach near the northern part of the Dead Sea. The water was a beautiful blue - I guess there was nothing to cloud it since it was so salty - 10 times as much as the ocean! We easily floated in the water - it actually felt weird to float so easily... my butt kept popping up when I lay on my stomach! We collected some salt crystals - after almost cutting our feet on them - and we gave each other mud baths. We looked disgusting but actually felt really good!

We decided to visit the Old City of Jerusalem when we got back just to explore a bit. Almost all the shops were closed but it was fun to look around a bit. It was so easy to get lost in the maze of concrete and stone caves that were the streets. We made our way to the wailing wall - even at night it was crowded! We passed many people in "uniform" - soldiers, palestinians with their traditional garb, and Hasidic Jews with very traditional all black clothes and furry hats or top hats.

Sun March 11: Today we did the walking tour in and around Jerusalem. We visited Mount Scopus

and the famous Mount of Olives, with their amazing views of Jerusalem and the spectacular gold dome of the Temple Mount. We also saw the garden of Gethsemane, the Russian Orthodox church with the gold onion shaped spires, and the walls of the Old City of Jerusalem. We saw many Jewish tombs on the hillside where Jesus made his "triumphal entry" to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday on a donkey. Many of the tombs were covered with stones of all the people coming to remember the people that had died. We followed Jesus' footsteps (or his donkey's) into the city. We visited the Church of All Nations and the garden of Gethsemane. The church is said to have the most beautiful mosaics in the world - and they were... I can only capture some of them in my pictures or else I would need 50 rolls!

We crossed the Kidron valley and got views of Zechariah's tomb, Absalom's pillar, and all the tombs on the Mount of Olives looking back the other direction. We clearly saw the layers of stones on the walls of the Old City - some were Roman, some were Byzantine, some Crusader and most recent were Ottoman.

After yet another shopping trip and doing lunch, we visited the tomb of Lazarus. It was buried deep in a cave probably down 30 steps - to "get up" was a non-trivial task! We visited a church in Bethany by the tomb with more beautiful mosaics, paintings, and Latin inscriptions. The acoustics were wonderful - we did some more singing and it sounded like the music of heaven!

We made it back to the hotel a bit early. We were all a bit tired from many full days. We wanted to rest but we also wanted to see as much as we could when we were in Israel - we could always rest when we got back home! We visited a little shop near the hotel - where Lynn almost bought her giant treasure chest - almost straight from a children's mystery like Chronicles of Narnia, and the rest of us bought knives and other trinkets - I think about half the tour group ended up getting knives one time or another! That would make customs fun :-)

We wrapped up the day with another little meeting - we often met at night to do bible and history studies and to share experiences. One Messianic Jew was sharing about how he felt so much "at home" in Israel that he decided to move permanently to Israel, learn Hebrew, and start a new life there!

Mon March 12: Today was another day for a walking tour around the Old City. Our first stop was through the Dung gate (what a name!) and to the wailing wall. We went through the airport like security and approached the Wall. Many Jews were near the wall, praying, and reciting their Torah. We all needed head coverings - none of the guys were allowed to go without a covering, so we borrowed cardboard "yamakas" to visit the wall! We saw many 13 year old boys doing their bar mitzvah ceremonies - wherever there were a bunch of rabbis, the boy, and video cameras!

We passed another swat team of soldiers with their guns - even got a picture with them - and made our way to the Rabbinical tunnels. They extended along most of the original western wall of the Tabernacle. We could have easily gotten lost in this maze of tunnels - there were even tunnels below us and above us that we could see into occasionally. Many excavations were still in progress!

We visited many spots along our tour of the Old City - the Lithos Stratos with the original stones that Jesus would have walked on, the Via Dolorosa where Jesus carried his cross on the day he was crucified, the Pools of Bethesda where the lame beggar was healed, and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher thought to contain the original tomb where Jesus was buried. The Lithos Stratos was interesting - the stones were very well worn but in some places you could still even see where the

Romans soldiers had carved game boards into the rocks. Many mosaics, churches, and shops adorned the way. The Church of the Holy Sepulcher was quite extravagant - containing many mosaics and paintings depicting the death and resurrection of Christ. There were priests shaking incense around the tomb - it was very sweet smelling - probably a way of maintaining ceremonial cleanliness of the area. It was striking how diligent and devoted many of the Jews were in keeping their traditions.

We later visited the upper room where Jesus often met with his disciples and where the last supper took place. It had actually been a synagogue and a mosque at one time - there was Arabic in the stained glass windows. We visited David's tomb nearby - again we needed the paper "yamaka" since we were in a holy place! We also went to Peter's church of the crowing cock - where Peter denied Christ 3 times and the cock crowed. It was perhaps one of the most beautiful churches we visited - very colorful mosaics adorned the walls and ceiling and stained glass windows brought the light in. The acoustics were great also - we did some more singing.

Our last stop was the garden tomb, just outside the walls of the Old City. The garden tomb is another place that many believe is where Christ was laid after he was crucified. It was strikingly different from most of the other holy sites we visited - it didn't have a shrine or really ornate building over it, but it was left to its own beauty. It was actually a relief in a way - it was very peaceful, not as "noisy" as many other sites. We saw Golgotha - the skull was still clearly visible in the rock, and we visited the empty tomb. We also got to do communion there and to reflect a little on Christ - the garden tomb with its beautiful scenery was a very relaxing place too, a bit of a break to focus on Christ for a moment and away from just the sightseeing. One interesting thing we saw just outside the garden tomb was a man playing an instrument like a cello with one string - and actually played it pretty well!

Tue March 13: This was our free day to tour around Jerusalem on our own. Many of us decided to tour the Holocaust museum just outside the main city. After seeing a couple of the sculptures outside we immediately got a feel of the horrible suffering 6 million Jews went through. The bleak, black, rough, jagged sculptures out front by the hall of remembrance... the names of the concentration camps in the hall with a flame symbolizing the undying human spirit... a sculpture of a pile of shoes with no bodies to fill them anymore... I could name so many more. Exhibited were many of the stories of the children, toys they had made, dolls, paintings, and other artwork demonstrating the creativity of the children enduring the ghettos and concentration camps. In the same way that many of the tombs earlier had been covered with stones symbolizing remembrance, many of the sculptures were also covered with stones - so many that some were falling off. We also visited the hall of names - it looked like a library with shelves of volumes of names... to read them all would take months!

We recovered a bit emotionally in our cab ride back to the Old City, where we did a bit more shopping and got lunch. We visited the Holy Rock Cafe to get a drink and were going to visit the "Old City Internet Cafe" but we ran out of time... we visited a small falafel restaurant and got our \$3.75 lunches of falafel and drinks - actually they were really good falafel sandwiches too! The moaning whine from the minarets went off again symbolizing one of the five Muslim prayer times... we were used to it by now. We made our way past more shops of fruits and vegetables, spices, dodged kids on their scooters holding their Pokemon toys, and headed back to our hotel.

A couple of us also visited the Shrine of the Book museum containing the Dead Sea scrolls found at Qumran. They were remarkably well preserved - I could actually still read the Hebrew that had vowel points! We also saw many other archaeological artifacts - jars, pieces of pottery, coins, and pieces of scrolls. We also visited the Israel museum - containing art and sculptures of cultures all around the world, some historical artifacts, even old typewriters from about the time they were invented - they

keyboard didn't always look the same! We only had time to visit about half the museum before we had to head to dinner and pack up to leave for Jordan the next morning.

Wed March 14: A couple members of the tour group had already left, but most of us were going on to Jordan. We made our way eastward, past the Dead Sea and up to the Jordan River where we made our border crossing. We made it through the militarized zone, after switching buses, drivers, guides, everything - vehicles were not able to cross the border. We wended up the narrow highway up to Mount Nebo, the place that Moses viewed the Promised Land but did not enter. We passed many fertile fields, more Beduins in their tents, many half built houses (to make room for the next generation), and herds of animals.

Mount Nebo had some beautiful views of the surrounding valley. We saw the sculpture of the snake that Moses lifted up to heal people of snake bites, and we visited the church at the top of the hill. More beautiful mosaic floors - actually some of the best preserved, since they had actually been covered over with other mosaics. The original floors had many icons of gods and goddesses that had been covered when a new people had conquered them who didn't believe in those gods.

Our last stop was Jerash, actually probably the most amazing Roman ruins we saw on the whole trip! Jerash was one of the cities in the Decapolis, like Bet Shean, so it contained many arched gates, a theater, hippodrome, temple, cardo, forum, and many other ruins. Almost all of the columns with their Corinthian and Ionic capitals were still standing, thanks to their very intricate design - they were built to handle motion from earthquakes and didn't fall in the great quake of 749 AD. It was also about 2000 years old but was so well preserved you could still see the tracks on the streets left from the wheels of the chariots that passed! Nancy performed a little solo in the theater showing the acoustics still work!

Thur March 15: We started the long drive to Petra pretty early... we didn't mind since we all knew Petra would be one of the highlights on our trip. We made our way past the modern city of Amman with its office buildings, KFC's and Burger Kings (translated into Arabic), and many pictures of King Hussein. Then it was desert, desert and more desert. For about 200 kilometers it was just flat desert - some 80 percent of Jordan is desert. But way in the distance we could make out the red rocks of Petra. We finally made our way there - it felt like forever though!

Petra was fascinating in so many ways... I had seen it when I was little from Indiana Jones films, but somehow never believed in my mind it was even real! Most of us decided to walk in - some took horses and chariots, but there were many places I had to explore just on our way in! We started seeing the carved tombs in the cliff walls - many of them were cut pretty deep into the rock and you could see the holes where the body must have been buried. The colors of the rock were beautiful and you could see how the red, yellow, white and brown layers of the rock changed as you looked around in the tombs.

We entered the Siq - a narrow canyon that traverses about 2 km and takes you right in to the middle of the famous structures of Petra. The canyon itself was pretty amazing - much like the famous Slot canyons in Arizona. The rock was a rich red and orange in color and you could still see many of the carvings and pedestals the Nabatean made for their idols - actually not so pretty spiritually though! At the end of the Siq - at first I didn't even realize it, but all of the sudden the most amazing carving came into view. It was the main treasury building. You could still see the carved columns, statues, and doorways into the various chambers!

We visited some of the Roman ruins in Petra also - the city had been occupied by both the Nabateans and Romans. We saw the Roman theater and some of the aqueducts carved out of the solid rock. We passed a couple shops, some artists making sand art sculptures, and many horses, camels and donkeys. There were so many holes cut out of the rock - it was amazing the amount of work that must have gone into the carving! Several of us decided to make the hike up to the altar of sacrifice at the top. It was a bit exhausting, but the views were very rewarding! At the top we saw the altar, some more tombs, and more obelisks. A couple Beduins looked like they were meditating but one stopped to show me some of the sights below. It was amazing the Beduins didn't even have shoes - the climb hurt my feet, even with my comfortable sneakers! They had probably become so accustomed to it.

We made our way out and headed back for the bus. I decided to take the horseback ride coming back - my legs were tired and cramped enough from the hike. Some decided to take camel rides. We stopped for Turkish baths that night - oh it felt so good! The soap from the Dead Sea salt and olive oil with the massage was quite soothing!

Fri March 16: Well sad to say it was our last day in Israel and Jordan. We left our hotel in Jordan kind of early in anticipation of the hassle at the border crossing - it closed at 2:30 for Shabbat, so we had to get going. Our bags got searched and ironically many of us got stopped for things we had actually bought in Israel that we were bringing back into Israel! The Jordanians didn't really have issues with what was brought into Jordan, but Israel did. We made our way back the way we came, crossing at the Allenby or King Hussein bridge, past the Dead Sea, through the Judean wilderness, and back to Jerusalem.

We spent most of the afternoon touring the Old City again, visiting shops and exploring a bit more. Many of us just rested in anticipation of the long flight home. Thank God that the flight and travel all went smoothly. Customs were a bit slow but no issues came up. After many No-Jet-Lag pills and many hours in the plane with our stopover in Toronto, we finally reached San Francisco. Our lives had all been touched deeply in one way or another, and in many ways I had been touched without realizing it right away!

There are pictures that go along with the story - unfortunately there is no easy way to link to them here since they are maintained by a third party site. Navigate to my Webshots albums at <http://community.webshots.com/user/mattshots>. Questions or comments, email me at mdblum@yahoo.com.