

## **Item #52 (Archeological Tour, July 1975: Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria)**

The Pontifical Biblical Institute from its early days sponsored guided archeological tours of Biblical sites in the Middle East. All faculty members were encouraged to participate in such tours, but as far as I could see relatively few chose to do so. Such tours were known as "Caravans". The Dominicans of the École biblique in Jerusalem also sponsored such tours, but they were much more rugged, with the participants living in tents when needed. The Caravans of the Biblical Institute were more expensive, but overnight stays were normally in hotels or religious houses. What follows, in Items #52 and #53, are my abbreviated accounts of Caravans 58 and 61 in the summers of 1975 (Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria) and 1976 (Iraq, Iran and Turkey). The leader of both these tours was Fr. Robert North, S.J., of the then Wisconsin Province of the Society of Jesus and faculty member of the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome and Jerusalem. His linguistic ability (command of English, French, Arabic and Hebrew) and experience in various excavation sites in the Middle East, made him an excellent guide. Except for a brief period in Iraq when I was actually in charge of the group, my role as second in command consisted in carrying cash in dollars or travelers checks in a money belt. (Neither caravan included Israel. I visited Israel on three occasions for a total of almost six months, and perhaps my experiences on these occasions can be the subject of a later Item.)

The Caravan of the summer of 1975 (#58) consisted of 25 men in addition to Fr. North and me. They were from a variety of countries but most had a basic command of English. Many, but not all, were from the Biblical Institute, either as graduates or as contemporary students. The tour of the four countries lasted from June 28 to July 28. This was hardly enough time to master any one of the four countries much less all four. But it was quite sufficient for creating memorable impressions to serve as background for our reading and study. Weeks in advance, Fr. North sent out a detailed itinerary that we were to follow with the urgent suggestion that we consult travel guides of the sites indicated and thus come somewhat prepared for what we were to see. I took his suggestion quite seriously and came armed with a fat notebook crammed with typewritten accounts copied from guidebooks I could find in the Biblical Institute library. In fact, this preparation proved quite adequate for most of what I was to see. What I was to see follows in abbreviated form.

**Day 1: Saturday, June 28:** By air Rome-Athens, Athens-Cairo. To Heliopolis for obelisk of Sesostris II of XII Dynasty. Brief look at Church of Holy Family at El-Matariya. (The Holy Family's Flight into Egypt according to one tradition ended here.) To College St. Famille for supper. Mass at about 9:45 p.m. Comment: I was used to seeing obelisks in Rome (some genuine, some not). But pre-Christian Egyptian history still remains largely a mystery to me, even though I have been able to explore on site various segments.

**Day 2: Sunday, June 29:** A.M. Cairo: Visit to Museum of Egyptian Antiquities. P.M. Visit to Pyramids. A most memorable day. A.M. The museum was extraordinarily rich and could have been visited for days. My favorite spot was Room 52 where the mummies were kept in horizontal glass cases. There I got within two feet of the head of the mummy of Ramses II, the pharaoh of the Exodus. Amazingly well preserved, red hair and all. The adventures of Moses and the Israelites in the Exodus will never be the same for me after seeing Ramses II. (I have learned since our visit that Room 52 has been closed to visitors out of respect for the dead.) The visit to the Pyramids was equally fascinating. From the outside, Sphinx and all, even more impressive than I thought it would be. We explored the Pyramid of Kheops, the largest. The entrance to the room where the tomb was was the most memorable moment for me in the whole visit. The actual tomb was in a large room deep down in the pyramid, but long since empty. The entrance constructed after the tomb and body had been left in place was an extremely narrow tunnel, so that visitors (I included) had to wiggle through as best they could. Few of our group tried it, because of claustrophobia, I thought. Mass at Jesuit College of The Holy Family (close to central train station) at 7:15 p.m.

Leontopoli (Yahudiyya); Tanis (Qantir); Mashuta; Ismailia; Suez Canal. Leontopoli (Yahudiyya) was probably a temple built by Onias IV sometime before 164 B.C. to preserve the line of the legitimate priesthood in Israel against Antiochius IV Epiphanes (175-164/3 B.C.). The site had never been excavated (it is in a remote area of the Delta) and I think it still remains that way. I was and remain curious if there is

any manuscript material hidden in clay jars in the foundation. Our visit was brief but, for me, fascinated as I am by the whole question of legitimacy, unforgettable. The rest of the day was devoted to exploring the area of Tanis which had to do with Ramses II and the ruins of three enormous temples. There were also suggestions of the Exodus of the Israelites under Moses from Egypt. I remember being shown an area of a football field where the Israelites were thought to have gathered before entering the Red Sea, though the exact site of the crossing still is an object of much debate. We ended our visit with a brief glimpse of Ismailia and the Suez Canal. There were many military police in the area. We were back to Holy Family for Mass at 9:30 p.m. in the chapel. (Much of the lost sleep due to the ambitious sightseeing schedule and the inclusion of Mass each day was made up on the bus that took us from place to place.)

**Day 4: Tuesday, July 1:** A.M. Old Cairo and the Coptic Museum. P.M. Muslim sites. Today's program was designed to give us some acquaintance with the city of Cairo and its contemporary religions. Christianity in Egypt today is largely composed of Copts, with its own language and its own hierarchy. There are Roman Catholics, Protestants, and Jews, but relatively few. We visited a number of early Christian churches from the early Christian centuries. For example, we saw churches such as St. Sergius from the late 4th or early 5th century. But the center of attention was the Coptic Museum, which was begun in 1920 and became a museum of the state in 1931. It is an immense treasure-house for early Christian life in Egypt, and provides a necessary link between the Egypt of the Pharaohs and the Egypt of the Muslims. We were told that at the time 8% of the population of "Old Cairo" were Copts, along with 42 Jewish families. The library contains precious manuscripts, many in fragments. In the afternoon we visited some mosques, especially the El-Azhar mosque, where we were treated to a special talk by Fr. North. At the end of the visits a trip to the train station where our train for Luxor left promptly at 7 p.m. (Fr. North traveled as cheaply as possible; our rides on the local train to Luxor were reserved but not the seats themselves. But this gave us the advantage of being more open to meeting Egyptians, some of whom spoke English.)

**Day 5: Wednesday, July 2:** The train arrives at Luxor at 5:40 a.m., a trip of over 300 miles. Arrive at Savoy Hotel for breakfast. I go for a jog along the Nile. (Some time during our stay at the Savoy I ask the man at the desk how much rain they get here. "Twelve years ago

it rained a few drops. That was the last time it rained here as far as I can recall”, was his answer.) In the morning our group visits the ruins of Luxor, which served as the Chapel of the New Year for the temple of Karnak. The things seeable at Luxor are largely underground. The omnipresent Ramses II was involved in its construction. My lack of knowledge of Egyptian history and culture was a handicap as usual in my appreciation of what I was seeing. As a result I have forgotten much of what I witnessed. In the afternoon we moved to the complex of ruins at Luxor, which was linked to Karnak by a walk flanked by sphinxes. Part of the complex was devoted to the origin of the legitimacy of the pharaohs, to which they traced all their power. In the afternoon our group visited the complex of temples at Karnak. There are three of them, each set off by a wall of brick (from north to south): Montou, Amon, and Mou. Nearby is the royal palace. It is intriguing to imagine what life must have been like for the pharaohs, and how much of this was known to the Jews before, during and after their centuries in Egypt.

**Day 6: Thursday, July 3:** At 6:15 a.m. the group was ferried across to the west bank of the Nile. (Foreigners, we were told, had to be ferried across the Nile by motor-powered boats; sailboats were not permitted for this task.) On the west of the Nile cultivated land quickly gave way to the desert. On the cultivated land were two huge figures of Memnon looking east and flanking the entrance to what little remains of the huge temple of Amenophis III. The god Memnon had a considerable influence on all in Egyptian culture that had to do with religion, and under this guise had a considerable influence on Greek mythology.

**Day 7: Friday, July 4:** A.M. Train from Luxor south to Idfu; P.M. Lunch in train station (mangoes and lemonade!). The town is known for the major Ptolemai temple, built between 237 B.C. and 57 B.C., into the reign of [Cleopatra VII](#). Of all the temple remains in [Egypt](#), the Temple of [Horus](#) at Edfu is the most completely preserved, thanks to much reconstruction. Built from sandstone blocks, the huge Ptolemaic temple was constructed over the site of a smaller [New Kingdom](#) temple, oriented east to west, facing towards the river. The later structure faces north to south and

leaves the ruined remains of the older temple **pylon** to be seen on the east side of the first court. In the town we saw the mosque with many men at prayer (Friday). Also a girl begging. Train ride south to Aswan, 80 miles (3:40 - 7:20 p.m.). Mass in lobby of Hotel Sennibal in the evening.

**Day 8: Saturday, July 5:** A.M. We attempted a visit to Elephantine, an island in the Nile with a temple dedicated to Isis but were unable to do so. Then, for those who wished, an 80-mile plane ride south to Abu-Simbel. By this time we were only about 80 miles from the border between Egypt and the Sudan. There was an ancient temple from Ramses II. Originally it was at the bottom of a gorge, but the waters of Lake Nasser were going to submerge it and it was moved vertically to a level where the waters could not hide it. Fr. North said there was a road south from Asswan to Abu-Simbel, but that it was frequently made impassable by shifting sand, so those who were interested (including me) along with Fr. North took a plane. We arrived and had Mass at 10:40 a.m. Then Fr. North gave us a tour of the temple and then suggested that we devote the half-hour before our return flight to meditating on what we had seen. For me this half-hour was one of the most profitable in the whole caravan. I took a position with my back to a cliff and looked out on the immense wilderness before me. No human habitation, no animals, no growing things. The silence was what bewitched me. I was able to understand why the Desert Fathers of early Christianity were able to leave everything and seek God in the desert. Back by plane to Aswan. Then a visit to the island of Philae. Very picturesque, with a small temple dedicated to Isis. On the way we stopped to visit a broken obelisk. Slaves had attempted to carve it out of marble near the surface of the ground and had, it is said, worked almost a year with the use of harder marble used as a saw, when suddenly the obelisk broke. We were riding in five taxis and the drivers had engaged in a race. After we were all out of the taxis Fr. North gave the taxi drivers a dressing down in Arabic. It was clear they understood him perfectly. We visited the High Dam of Aswan near a generating station. The immensity of the flow of the water was a convincing argument for the importance of the High Dam for the generation of power and the conservation of water for the entire country. Finally, at the end of a long day, we succeeded in visiting the island of Elephantine, with rocks covered with ancient inscriptions and with the small temple of Isis.

**Day 9: Sunday, July 6:** A.M. During the night we took a train north to Mallawi. Arrive at 4:40 a.m. Breakfast on remains of supper from train. As we wait for a boat to cross the Nile some local Egyptians gather silently next to our open trailer. A boy of about 10 years of age looks hungry and I give him a small piece of dry toast. He looks at it and then wraps it in his dirty cloak and turns back, presumably to give it to his mother. I am stunned by the evidence of hunger. The man in charge of our crossing carries a rifle and wears bands of bullets across his chest. Evidence that there are robbers in the area. We cross the Nile to the east bank. This is the area of El-Amarna, A plethora of ancient temple ruins. Also the site of the discovery of an abundance of early Christian papyri (Oxyrrinkos). We find our way by accident into a Muslim cemetery. I see a human skull. Fr. North urges us to leave to avoid arousing understandable Muslim ire. We cross the Nile again and board a train for Cairo at 7:14 p.m. More passengers than places, but the Egyptians refuse to let us stand and generously give us their seats. We arrive in Cairo at 11:55 p.m. Our faces are blackened by the smoke: the train was pulled by a steam engine.

**Day 10: Monday, July 7:** After our six-day excursion to the south Fr. North had planned a day of rest in Cairo before our final visits in Egypt. But before we had headed south one of the group, a priest from New Zealand, had asked me to accompany him to an uncle's grave in a Commonwealth Cemetery miles to the west of Alexandria near the site of the battle of El-Alamein. The priest's father had given his son a hundred dollar check before he left New Zealand and asked him to celebrate Mass on the father's brother's grave. His brother had been killed in a skirmish with German troops shortly before the battle of El-Alamein. The priest himself had remained in Cairo during the excursion south of the rest of the group to remain rested for the journey to Alexandria by train and then west to the cemetery by taxi. Charity prompted me to say yes to the fellow priest's request. We boarded a train in Cairo for Alexandria at 6:10 a.m. I, of course, had had very little sleep and slept most of the way. The New Zealander defended me before the Egyptians who wanted to talk to both foreigners by explaining why I was so tired. In Alexandria we went to a taxi stand and found a taxi

driver who was willing to drive us to the cemetery and back and wait for us to say Mass for \$75. The highway to the cemetery went within eyeshot of the Mediterranean Sea for the most part, which sea changed into an exquisite turquoise color as we went west. We came to the cemetery after an uneventful ride. The Commonwealth Cemetery lay to our left, inland, to the south. The German Cemetery lay to the north, to our right, between the highway and the sea. A visit to the office of the Commonwealth Cemetery quickly showed us the site of the uncle's grave. We were warned that on no account were we to go outside the fence marking the boundary of the cemetery, for there were unexploded landmines buried in the sand. The extremely dry nature of the climate had left the landmines in their original state, ready to explode when agitated. My companion had brought a bag with all the necessary accoutrements for the Mass, which we solemnly said together. We were on the edge of another portion of Egyptian desert, and again I was deeply moved by the silence. After the Mass and a few minutes of thanksgiving we returned to the entrance, boarded our waiting taxi, returned to Alexandria (where we had some difficulty cashing the \$100 check), and were back in Cairo at the Holy Family College by 9:00 p.m.

**Day 11: Tuesday, July 8:** Early start, express train Cairo to Alexandria. The main attraction of the day was a visit to the Monastery of St. Macarius in the Wadi-Ennatroon about 75 miles south of Alexandria. It was one of several Coptic monasteries. Our bus had to take a side road from the main highway from Alexandria and we drove several hundred yards through sand until we came to the monastery's high walls. An English-speaking monk showed us around. The rooms were impressively modern. Many of the monks seemed quite young, and we were told that vocations were flourishing. At the end of the tour we were gathered together in a modern sitting room with air conditioning and over-stuffed chairs. After Fr. North gave a brief speech of thanksgiving the English-speaking monk pulled out a printed piece of paper and began to read. The first sentence that he read seemed oddly familiar. The second explained why: I had written the sentences myself! Nothing like hearing oneself quoted in a completely strange place. The monk was reading an advertisement for Zerwick—Grosvenor, a word-by-word analysis of the Greek text of the New Testament. The monk, knowing that we were a tour of the Pontifical Biblical Institute, was asking us for a gift of some copies of this very useful publication of the Institute. Fr. North promised that he would see that some copies

were sent to the monastery. As indeed they were. I made sure of that. We eventually found our way to the Christian Brothers School where we saw some students working out on a green practice field. It seemed so strange after the desert of the monasteries to the south. Mass at 5:30 p.m. in the school chapel.

**Day 12: Wednesday, July 9:** A.M. to Memphis, about 20 miles south of Cairo. It was the most important religious center for the early dynasties of Egypt. It has also been site of many archeological excavations. Today no one lives in the vast site but there are ruins everywhere, well worth the visit. Our friend Ramses II is well represented for a more modern area than his surroundings. The site was well known to contemporary Greeks, who are responsible for changing the Egyptian name of the principle settlement, Mennofre, to Memphis. The first pyramids ever built were located there. Most of the present attractions were discovered by excavations in the last two hundred years. In the afternoon back to Cairo for the flight to Jordan, leaving Egypt at 5:00 p.m. The flight lasted well over an hour, with the pilot flying deep over the Mediterranean to avoid Israeli air space, then over Lebanon and over Syria and then south into Jordan. Arrival at the Hotel Philadelphia in Amman. Mass in the hotel.

**Day 13: Thursday, July 10:** Near the Hotel Philadelphia a large theater of Roman times, 2nd century). A nearby museum with a copper scroll, a writing desk from Qumran. A visit to the ruins of Gerasa (see Luke 8,37 and the Gerasenes). Founded by Alexander the Great. Had all the elements of a great Hellenistic city. Early on it became a Christian city with its own bishop. Then on to neighboring Gadara, with ruins of a theater, graves, an aqueduct. We said Mass on a ledge next to the ruins. A splendid view of the Lake of Tiberias and the land stretching mile after mile to Mt. Hermon. Back south in the Jordan Valley. View of dolmens, primitive tombs from thousands of years before Christ. Quick look at Ghassul, a site in the East Jordan Dead Sea Valley, excavated under the direction of the Pontifical Biblical Institute in the early thirties. The culture excavated is called Middle Chalcolithic and is dated between 3600 and



3300 B.C. Fr. North wrote a report of the excavations: *Ghassul 1960 Excavation Report*, *Analecta Biblica* 14, 1961. Our visit to the spot was brief and pro forma, merely to show what the Biblical Institute had been up to in the way of archeological excavation. We were there at 4:30 p.m., with the Dead Sea visible to the south. On our way back to Amman we stopped at an irrigation canal for a drink of fresh water at 5:15 p.m..

**Day 14: Friday, July 11:** A.M. to Nebo (Deuteronomy 32,49), about 25 miles from Amman, where Moses could have seen a large stretch of the Promised Land into which he would never enter. Magnificent view. Altitude 803 meters. Welcoming cool weather. Mass on top. Farmers at this altitude in Jordan work in a very hilly landscape, linked by small irrigation pipes. Down to a lower level not far from the Dead Sea to the ruins of the kingdom of Moab (the Biblical Ruth, who contributed to the line of David, was a Moabite). About 40 miles from Amman. Nothing very special about their culture to distinguish them from their neighbors. In mid-day we took lunch at a rest house in the neighborhood of Kerak, about 60 miles from Amman, after crossing a deep valley. On to Petra, "The Rose Red City Half as Old as Time". Our group overwhelmed the room capabilities of the small hotel at the entrance of Petra. The manager said he had a place in a nearby grave. I offered to take it and spent the night in a place chiseled out of the rock where a body once lay. Most of the day was spent in exploring the city carved out of the reddish rock

**Day 15: Saturday, July 12:** A.M. Visits to area around Petra. The great theater, capable of holding 3,000 spectators, a relic of imperial Rome. Other ruins from Egyptian times, some with Christian inscriptions. Two hours south of Petra, after a half-hour walk, Jebel Haroun, 1,396 meters high. Magnificent view of the Negev of Israel, of the Wadi Araba.

**Day 16: Sunday, July 13:** A.M. Exploration of Nabatean area. Visit to Ras en Naqab. Not much to see. Arrival at Palm Beach Hotel in early afternoon at Aqaba. Aqaba is the ancient Ezion Geber, a port founded by Solomon. The Crusaders named it Aila. Very hot: 120 degrees Fahrenheit. Israel and Saudi Arabia very near. Discotheque near hotel; noise until 2:00 a.m..

**Day 17: Monday, July 14:** Leave Aqaba at 7:00 a.m. Long road trip through desert to Amman. Sand everywhere. Arrival at midday. Visit Catholic parish at 12:15 p.m. Visit to citadel and museum. Visit by me to convent of Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity. All I knew was that their convent was somewhere in the south of Amman. I tell the taxi driver to drive to that neighborhood and I look for the sisters' habits drying in the sun. Eventually I spot them almost hidden in a back yard. I know one of the sisters from Rome, Sr. Patrick, M.C. Pleasant visit with her and five other sisters. Back to parish for Mass at 5:30 p.m. To New Park Hotel at 6:45 p.m. Meet with Arab family. Fr. North goes to each member of the group and gets their agreement to go personally to Lebanon, where a civil war had broken out a few weeks before. He said he would get them a flight back to Rome if they were unwilling to take the risk of visiting Beirut and other parts of the country. All agreed to go to Lebanon.

**Day 18: Tuesday, July 15:** Leave Amman by MidEast Airlines at 9:45 a.m., arrive in Beirut, Lebanon, at 10:40 a.m. Lodging at the Universite S. Joseph (Jesuit) in Beirut. At 12:00 noon visit to the National Museum. I noted in my diary: "The whole museum is a visual delight." Green and blue backgrounds for the displays. Back to the Universite S. Joseph for Mass at 6:00 p.m.

**Day 19: Wednesday, July 16:** In the morning to the river and narrow defile Nahr al Kelb. This is an area that has been inhabited since the Paleolithique Age. It was a key point for invaders like the Egyptians and the Assyrians. All kinds of inscriptions from more modern times: Latin, Greek, Arab, French, English. On to Byblos where a group of workmen were laboring and drinking out of their water jugs, aiming spouts of water with impressive accuracy into their mouths. And laughing hilariously when one of our group would try to imitate them and end up with water all over his face. This was the Gebal of Scripture, heavily influenced by the Egyptians. Stele of Ramses II and an Assyrian king side by side. Soldiers. Traffic jam. Lunch at café on brink of canyon. Excavations of Roman and Phoenician villages on site of ancient Byblos. Visit to a small group of cedars at Becharri.

Picture of group. (At one time cedars covered the hillsides of Lebanon, but now there are only two relatively small groups, one to the north where we were, and one to the south. Mass at cedars to the north at 2:30 p.m., with me as principal celebrant. On to Baalbek (Lord of the Beka), a village to the east of Phoenician origin. After Alexander the Greeks took over and named the place Heliopolis in honor of the Sun. Then, under Augustus, the name became Beryte, and three Roman gods were honored: Jupiter, Venus and Mercury. After a visit necessarily brief, back to Beirut.

**Day 20: Thursday, July 17:** Down south to Saida, the ancient Sidon. One of the most important towns of Phoenicia. The town was and is divided into two parts, one near the sea and the other higher up on a hill. We walk through the Arab neighborhood to visit the Sisters of St. Joseph, of Crusader origin. On to village of Sarafand on a hill, the Zarephat or Zarepta, famous for its connection with the miracles of Elijah. Abandoned as a place of dwelling in the middle ages, probably for a lack of security because of exposure to the sea. Back to the road to Tyr (Sour in Arabic). We are stopped by a military officer who asks if we were headed to the border with Israel. We were. He says that area is full of guerilla groups who could easily capture us and cause problems for our release by the Lebanese military. He says we can go to Tyr but then we have to return to him and from there proceed to Damascus by a more northern route than Fr. North had planned. And to make sure he took all of our passports. We went on to Tyr which was next to the sea. Lunch in café in center of Tyr, looking out to the sea. Extensive excavations. Back to Sidon for passports and on to Damascus. No problem at border except a delay. No houses outside Damascus in countryside. Checkpoints by army. Tank defenses. Arrival in Damascus at Hotel Normandie.

**Day 21: Friday, July 18:** Damascus appears in Genesis 14,16 as well as in ancient Egyptian and Assyrian texts. More prominent in the time of Solomon (around 940 B.C.) when it became a capital in an Aramaic country that has left few archeological traces. Then it fell to the Assyrians, the Babylonians, and the Persians until Alexander the Great made it into a Greek city. Then conquests by other tribes until the Romans captured it in 66 B.C. This set the stage for the arrival of St. Paul and Christianity. The Persians arrived eventually in 614 A.D. In the morning we visited the national museum and in the afternoon we went to the outskirts of the

city. Damascus is surrounded by hills, and we went to one of them and enjoyed the panorama as a group. Then some of us walked off in groups of two or three to view the panorama from different perspectives. Mass in a local hospice of the Vincentians.

**Day 22: Saturday, July 19:** To the huge principal mosque of Damascus. In Roman times it has been a temple dedicated to the Damascene Jupiter before being rededicated and renamed John the Baptist under the Emperor Theodosius (379-395), and then, in 708, to the mosque it is today. After visiting the mosque in the morning we visited the house of Ananias where St. Paul recovered his sight (Acts 9,11), the Street Called Straight (Acts 11,11), the Roman Forum (2 Corinthians 11,32). We tried to visit the place where, according to tradition, St. Paul was lowered from the window of a house forming part of the city wall, but the house was closed. Mass in the area, in the house of Ananias.

**Day 23: Sunday, July 20:** We head north from Damascus. I count 14 tells or places where excavations are possible. All have heavy iron rings on their tops to prevent locals from scavenging. 35 kilometers north of Damascus we come to Maaloula, one of three villages composed of Catholics whose local dialect was the Aramaic spoken by Jesus and the first Christians. Fr. North stops a boy about 12 years old as we walk as a group down an unpaved street. He engages the boy in a discussion in Arabic, explaining that we are Catholics just as he is. Once he had gained his confidence he pointed to a stone on the unpaved street and asked him how he called it in his own village language. "Kefa" he replied unhesitatingly. The very word Jesus used to Peter in informing him that he was the "rock" on which He would build His Church. We were all stunned: it was one of the high points of the entire caravan. We later celebrated Mass on a ledge overlooking the village, which was set in the midst of carefully tended farm lands. Strong winds. The area was the scene of a battle by the Egyptian forces of Ramses II in 1286-1285 that was indecisive for the control of the area but indicates the scope of Egyptian influence. On to Crac of the Crusaders, built around 1110. A chateau with an elaborate defensive system that was efficacious in warding

off a Muslim attack in 1163. Later Saladin tried to conquer it but was equally unsuccessful. Later it came into the possession of the Knights Hospitalers. We are fascinated by it and Fr. North has trouble getting us to leave. We come to a local village, Qatna. 50 or 60 boys and girls come to greet us after their elders were satisfied that we were not Russians! Wind ferocious. Brief visit to Homs, a city important in Roman history.

**Day 24: Monday, July 21:** Off to Hamat, but we do not visit, only see it from afar, to come back at a later date. Huge water wheels, 10 to 15 meters in diameter. Site of an important city in the middle of the first millennium B.C. We move farther north to the neighborhood of Aleppo. We come to the ruins of Ebla, which prospered 2100-1800 B.C. Scene of Italian excavations. As we arrive on the scene Fr. North is not sure if we are at Ebla or not, but a group of children running to meet us shouting "Ciao, Ciao" solves his problem. The language found on tablets in the ruins could be important for the background of Hebrew. Ruins covered with earth except for key spots where the Italian teams have been active. In 1600 the city was destroyed by Aleppo, 35 kilometers to the north. Our visit to Ebla was superficial but fascinating: the excavators were afraid we might tamper with their findings. We pass the night at Homs.

**Day 25: Tuesday, July 22:** Lengthy tour of Palmyra, and important city for a great part of the second and first millennia B.C. Then Aramaic spoken, the lingua franca of the Middle East. Visit to museum. One local language gave rise to Syriac. Mass in front of ruins of Baal-Shamon Temple as sun was setting and an almost full moon was rising. Wind was very strong. Pass night at Palmyra at Hotel Zenobia..

**Day 26: Wednesday, July 23:** . Visit to Apameia, which is situated on the right bank of the Orontes. Excavations by Belgians. Swarms of children. Camels led by a girl on a donkey, To the north the remains of three Christian basilicas. Ancient city that was built on right bank of Orontes. Roman settlement built according to Roman and Hellenistic plan. Enormous. We spend much time examining the results of the excavations on the spot. The ancient theater is one of the largest known. Unfortunately the Belgians were unable to excavate it entirely, at least before we were there. On to Hamat, a settlement that goes back to Neolithic times. Enjoyed

prosperous times under Syro-Hittites. Finally conquered by Arabs in 650 A.D. On to Mari (Tell Hariri), A town that flourished around 3100-2900 B.C. at the beginning of a very long and checkered history. Spend the night at Aleppo.

**Day 27: Thursday, July 24:** Leave Aleppo at 6:00 a.m. Arrive at Deir-el-Zor at noon. On the way I see from the window of our bus a woman walking down a side road, about 100 yards from where our bus was traveling along a highway. The woman was balancing a large container, presumably of water, with her left hand on her head. The woman was clad in graceful robes going down to her ankles, and had her back to us. In an instant the vision was gone as the bus moved on, but it remains in my mind as a summary of everyday life in the Middle East at the time. After lunch we visited Doura Europos. It was founded around 300 B.C. by Macedonians and destroyed by an earthquake in 161 A.D. Occupied by Romans and Parthians in between. Later associated with Palmyra. Ruins of two ancient synagogues superimposed are found there, which occupied my interest to the point where I delayed the progress of the group a bit back to Deir-el-Zor. There we spent the night but not before enjoying a late evening refreshment in moonlight looking out on to the Euphrates from a garden next to the hotel.

**Day 28: Friday, July 25:** Leave Deir-el-Zor, back to Aleppo, A visit to the museum there. Then, on to Carchemisch (2 Kings 23,29; 24,1) This was the site of the capital of one of the kingdoms established in what is now northern Syria at the beginning of the first millennium B.C. on the occasion of the destruction of the Hittite Empire in Asia minor by the invasion of the peoples of the sea around 1180. Carchemisch was situated on the Euphrates between Assyria and the Phoenician kingdoms. Most of the tell seems to be unexcavated. We return to Aleppo for the night.

**Day 29: Saturday, July 26:** Leave Aleppo for last time and head west. 31 kilometers northwest of Aleppo we come across part of a Roman road at Qalat Siman: 1 mile long, 20 feet wide. It was probably built around 100 A.D. It was this Roman road system that made the preaching of the Gospel relatively easy in the primitive Church. We come to Qalaat

Seman, where Simon Styletes lived on pillars for many years. Simon was born around 390 and around the year 412 began his life on a series of pillars. Some of our group thought his view of life hilarious to the point of ridiculing him. I did not share their point of view. We spent much time in the monastery surrounding the pillar where the saint was when he died on September 27, 459, for it is one of the best examples of Christian art in all of Syria. The site eventually became a center of pilgrimage. We visit Ras-Shamra in the afternoon, the site of Ugaritic civilization and texts around 1200 B.C. Those of us who had studied at the Pontifical Biblical Institute had had courses in Ugaritic and its influence on Biblical Hebrew from Fr. Mitchell Dahood, S.J., who made use of the presumed connection in his Anchor Bible Commentary on the Psalms. We spent some time moving about the excavated area. Mass at 7 p.m. at Jesuit church. Chill breeze from the sea. We spend the night at Lattakya.

**Day 30: Sunday, July 27:** Leave Lattakya. Brief look at Roman theater at Jabla. Stop at village of Tartous, the site of the ancient village of Antaradus, which is facing the sea and the isle of Rouad, an island mentioned in Genesis. We have lunch in a restaurant overlooking the sea. I get a shoeshine as I eat. Much needed. Visit after lunch to Tortose, with its ancient chapel consecrated to the Virgin. Early cathedral transformed into museum. We brave choppy seas to visit island of Rouad. We head for Beirut. On the way we view from the bus the Chateau of Marqab, that figures in Muslim, Byzantine and Crusader history. Mass in Beirut at 7:30 p.m.

**Day 31: Monday, July 28:** Fly from Beirut to Athens. Spend night in Athens.

**Day 32: Tuesday, July 29:** Fly from Athens to Rome.

**Some Reflections:** I am writing all of this during May of 2020, at a remove of almost 45 years from the events recorded. They are as accurate as I could make them, but I fear that there may be unintended inaccuracies as regards dates and places. I had prepared a very detailed notebook of the places that Fr. North indicated to those who had signed up for his tour in advance, but various unforeseen circumstances had constrained him to modify the agenda as the caravan developed. After experiencing the events narrated above I cannot praise Fr. North enough. Once I had

experienced all the practical problems of guiding all of us through such strange places I came to experience his skill and generosity. I wish to stress the importance that he gave (and I shared) in saying Mass together daily. I think we celebrated every day, though I may have missed a day or two in my account. With the possibilities that on-line information gives today my sketchy outline can be the basis for a much more detailed knowledge of many of the places mentioned.

During the caravan Fr. North let slip that he was considering a caravan during the summer of 1976 through Iraq, Iran and Turkey. As soon as I heard this I began to pester him to follow through. I was successful. The results are in the following Item.