

Item #54 (Visits to Israel)

The following Item is not about archeological tours, as are Items #52 and #53 above, but about my three visits to Israel in 1962, 1986-1987 and 1992. They are designed to give some balance to the archeological tours, which concern short visits to Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Iran and Turkey. These are useful to visit to get knowledge of the Christian Middle East, but not the heart of the matter as is Israel. I do not claim that my three rather brief stays in Israel along with my two archeological tours gave me a definitive knowledge of the Christian Middle East. On the contrary! But they did give me a useful background for my study of the Bible. And as such, can be recommended to anyone interested in such a study.

Visit #1: July 3 – October 9, 1962

I arrive in the port of Haifa after a trip by sea from port of Athens with another Jesuit. Trip from Haifa to Jerusalem in a “Sheroot”, a 12-passenger taxi. Young woman next to me in back seat had just learned from her gynecologist that she is pregnant for the first time as she and her husband had desired. She tells me this in German, the only language we have in common. I wish to examine the landscape on my first visit but she expresses joy in German three times to which I answer as best I can in German. That afternoon in the house of the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Jerusalem I hear machine gun fire as I unpack my suitcase: Jordanian troops on the walls of the old city decided to celebrate the independence of Algeria by killing three Israeli soldiers on a patrol in the wadi under the walls despite an understanding to give such patrols free passage. Thus I begin an 8-day retreat. Get used to wearing white cassock. After the retreat my colleague and I begin study of modern Hebrew under direction of Fr. Louis Semkowski, S.J., Polish Jesuit who is an expert on modern Hebrew and superior of the house in Jerusalem. Both my Jesuit colleague and I are beginning doctoral studies at the Biblical Institute and our tutoring by Fr. Semkowski as well as six weeks at an Israeli school for Hebrew will serve as the preparation for an exam at the end of our stay. In our spare time before beginning class at the Israeli school my colleague (who eventually left the Society of Jesus) and I explore the new city of Jerusalem.

On August 5 (a Sunday) my Jesuit companion and I present ourselves at the Ulpan Etzion, a school for modern Hebrew frequented by immigrants and anyone else, like us, who wishes to improve his grasp of Hebrew, ancient or modern. After a preliminary exam my colleague and I are assigned to different classes (he was the more capable student of Hebrew), each having about twenty men and women. The school was a fair distance south of the southern border of Jerusalem, not too far from

Bethlehem. I was the only *goy* (non-Jew). Our teacher was a young woman of about 20 years of age named Orah (= “Light”). Students from various countries, including the United States. I become a friend of Moses Saba from Morocco. We meet during recess periods and try to speak Hebrew with each other. Class is from 8:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. except for an hour less on Fridays and Sundays to honor the Sabbath on which there was no class of course. We were encouraged to speak Hebrew as much as possible even when not on the grounds of the Ulpan. I recall one incident when I was seated with a young woman from Pittsburgh on a bus returning to Jerusalem after five hours of class. I recall saying in Hebrew: “*Slika, aval akshav ani sarik . . .*” (“Pardon me, but now I must . . .”) and to my horror realized I was faced with the need of supplying an irregular infinitive for “get off”. But not to worry. After a moment’s pause two middle-aged ladies in the seat in front of us turned their heads around and simultaneously said “*laredet*” (“to get off”), the precise form I needed. And we all had a laugh. At least they understood what I was saying on the seat behind them! The lessons at Ulpan for my colleague and me lasted until September 14, Friday. Following this we took a test on modern Hebrew from Fr. Semkowski that was part of our curriculum in doctoral studies at the Pontifical Biblical Institute. We said farewell to the teachers and fellow students we had got to know in our weeks at the Ulpan Etzion Institute. The full course necessary for getting a fundamental grasp of modern Hebrew was considered to be six months. I found that I was able to read a pamphlet in modern Hebrew without the help of vowel signs. And being majors in New Testament that was considered to be sufficient for me and for my colleague. Thus the major work of the summer for us two was over. We still had some time before our sailing from Haifa for Italy on October 9 that we used in getting to know Israel better.

But before giving an account of these adventures it is necessary to tell of the most important event of the entire summer, our Hebrew studies included. On August 15 my colleague and I pronounced final vows as members of the Society of Jesus at a Mass in the Biblical Institute chapel in Jerusalem. The recipient of our vows was Fr. Semkowski, the superior of the house. The Mass was at 6:30 p.m. on a normal class day for the both of us at the Ulpan. Final vows after five hours of class! The celebration in the form of a luncheon at which the United States counsel and his wife were present was on Saturday, August 18, at 1:00 p.m. The counsel had suggested that he arrange for the two of us to go to the Holy

Sepulchre in the Old City and make our vows there. But this would have meant going through a number of check points and going from Israeli Jerusalem to Jordanian Jerusalem and that seemed too risky to the two of us so we declined the offer with thanks. Several days after our final Hebrew exam my colleague and I took a two-day tour with two other students from the Biblical Institute through the Negev down to Eilat on the Gulf of Aqaba on the Red Sea. Beginning from Jerusalem we passed through Tel-Aviv, Beersheba and a number of other settlements as part of a professional travel agency with a professional guide. It is about 175 miles as the crow flies from Jerusalem to Eilat and most of it was through the hilly desert known as the Negev.

After several days of rest my colleague and several other guests at the Biblical Institute took a four-day trip by rented automobile down to the Dead Sea to Sodom and up to Galilee, visiting one famous spot after another (for example, Mt. Tabor, Jerusalem, Capernaum, the Horns of Hattin, Hazor, Megiddo). We spent the nights at various Catholic and Jewish religious hospices. After our trips south to Eilat and east to the Dead Sea and north to Galilee I felt that I had had an excellent geographic introduction to Israel.

At the end of our summer in Israel my colleague and I took some members of the staff for a two-day trip to the south of Israel to Joppa, Tel-Aviv, and other places some of the staff had not visited. Once back in Jerusalem I visited the synagogue a block away from the Biblical Institute on Yom Kippur (October 8). I walked in uninvited and without escort, dressed in my white cassock of a priest, passing the relatively small women's section, and sat down respectfully at a place in the simple bench on the wall while a large number of men were standing and chanting in Hebrew. Immediately an official came to me and complained that I was not praying with the other men as I should. He thrust a Hebrew prayer book into my hands. I remained for about a half hour doing exactly as I had been instructed and then walked respectfully out of the building, leaving my prayer book where I had been seated. Mission accomplished in Israel for the summer of 1962!

The next morning my colleague and I took a train from Jerusalem to Haifa, explored Haifa a bit, and soon found ourselves ensconced on a small passenger ship, the *Enotria*, bound for Bari in Italy.

Visit #2: December 23, 1987 – January 5, 1988

I find myself years after my first visit to Israel as Dean of the Biblical Faculty of the Pontifical Biblical Institute required to make a *pro forma* visit to the Pontifical Biblical House in Jerusalem, the same house where I had spent such a rewarding summer in 1962. This time I arrive alone and by air: Rome Fiumicino 13:35 – Lod (Ben Gurion) 17:20. Arrive in rain. This time Israel is in control of the entire city of Jerusalem. No more Jordanian troops in the Old City. I visit the Dominican house of studies, the Ecole Biblique, the Holy Sepulchre. The day before Christmas I visit Mother Teresa's sisters in Bethlehem. For Christmas I pull rank and get the one ticket granted the Biblical Institute and concelebrate at Bethlehem in a church near where Christ was born, going through seven check-points (Israeli, Palestinian, Franciscan) in the rain to the place where the concelebrants were vesting. After Midnight Mass we celebrants go in procession to an Orthodox Church nearby to the exact spot in the crypt where tradition and a mosaic say that the crib of the newborn child was. After unvesting, a visit to some of the caves made famous by the presence of St. Jerome around the year 400. Day after Christmas, interviews with Biblicum students a.m., visit to Studium Biblicum Franciscanum p.m. On 27th visit to Dead Sea as guest of Fr. Murphy-O'Connor, O.P. Visit to Qumran. Lunch in parking lot overlooking Dead Sea. Next day visit to Mother Teresa's sisters at Nablus on West Bank. Climb Mt. Gerizim and view Samaritans. On the 30th visit to Gaza City where Mother Teresa's sisters have charge of about 20 deformed Arab children. The children seldom see a male and go wild when I appear, wanting to be tossed in the air. My heart says yes but my back says no. On the 31st meeting with faculty of Biblical Institute a.m., p.m. exploration of Mt. of Olives with the aid of a young Arab boy. On December 31 Mass at midnight for Mother Teresa's sisters at Gaza City. Back to Jerusalem in the morning. Visit of Latin Patriarchate on New Year's Day. On January 2nd visit to Rockefeller Museum a.m., visit to Cenacle, Tomb of David, other sites in Old City. On the 3rd visit to southern parts of Old City including Valley of Hinnem. Visit of Israeli Museum p.m. On the 4th meeting with professors of the Hebrew University who teach Pontifical Biblical Institute students in Jerusalem. Then meeting with faculty of Jerusalem Biblicum to get information for my job as vice-rector in Rome. Lunch in Bethlehem with family of Arab employee. To Ben Gurion Airport at 5:45 a.m. on January 5th. Pick up pre-checked

bag, leave Israel at 12:05 p.m. arrive Fiumicino in Italy at 3:15 p.m. I can now say I have been introduced to much contemporary Biblicum life in Israel and much more besides.

Visit #3: June 29 – August 16, 1992

In 1992 I was invited by Fr. Thomas Rosica, a Basilian priest, to accompany a month's tour of Israel with 48 Canadian and United States priests and laymen and –women, and one religious woman. Fr. Rosica is a former student of mine at the Pontifical Biblical Institute. I and another Scripture professor were invited as authorities to accompany the group and to give occasional talks explaining the significance of what we were experiencing. My quota was five talks and a homily. For which all expenses were paid with the addition of a handsome stipend. The purpose of the month was spiritual, with emphasis on visiting New Testament sites and having talks on the spiritual life and prayer. There was no attempt to visit as many archeological sites as possible. At the end of the month with this group I stayed in Israel to show some friends around the country and to take advantage of my presence in the Holy Land.

The month-long tour with the 48 persons from Canada and the United States was divided into three parts: 1) a few days in the Negev, the hilly desert to the south of inhabited Israel; 2) two weeks in Jerusalem; 3) ten days in Galilee. It was all very much worthwhile. In the Negev the most instructive thing I learned was the temperatures of the desert: bitter cold at night, shadeless heat during the day. In Jerusalem what was most memorable for me was the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which is in all probability the place where Christ died on the cross and the place where He rose from the dead. An atmosphere of respectful silence helps make the memory of a visit even more meaningful. In the north of the country a scheduling confusion had our group staying at a luxury hotel for one night instead of the hospice of the *khibutz* (communal farm) where we eventually ended up staying for the rest of our tour. The luxury hotel was so constructed that part of it jutted out into the Sea of Tiberias. At 5:00 p.m. in the morning after a night's rest I was up and exploring. I came to the part of my floor that jutted out into the water. I found a window and looked down. There below me were four men fishing, two to a boat. They were casting nets in respectful silence. I cannot imagine that casting nets in the time of Jesus was any different. "Follow Me and I will make you fishers of men". These are but three memories of a month full

of memories.

After the departure of the group of 48 I met one of my high school friends, a medical doctor who had done much volunteer medical work in Latin America. He, his wife, and a friend of theirs from my home town of St. Louis had come to Israel for my high school friend to receive the highest honor in the Knights of the Holy Sepulchre, an honor that had to be given by the Latin bishop of Jerusalem in Jerusalem and nowhere else. It was a moment of real pride for me to witness the ceremony in the bishop's palace. But the real high point of my few days of showing this small group of three around a bit of Galilee and a bit of Jerusalem occurred in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. I asked the gracious Franciscan priest if I could say Mass for my three friends in the chapel in front of the tomb where the body of Christ was laid after the crucifixion. He replied to my request, "How many in your group?" "4, counting me", was my reply. "Then why not say Mass from INSIDE the tomb". I was stunned, He pointed out the spot just wide enough for 4 persons to stand crowded together, with the celebrant placing the hosts and chalice on the same stone where the body of Jesus lay. I learned later that His body was on a stone two feet below the level where I placed the hosts and chalice. But I was shaking with awe at the unexpected gift that Divine Providence had given me. I am still in awe when I think of this Mass, the most meaningful of the thousands of Masses I have celebrated in my 62 years of priesthood. (This is being written on June 20, 2020.)

My third and final principal event of this third visit to Israel began on Saturday afternoon, August 8, when a religious sister came to the Biblical Institute house in Jerusalem and brought me to a retreat house about 8 miles west of Jerusalem. I was to give a six-day retreat to 18 persons: 7 from Malta, 4 from India, and the rest from various places in the United States and Europe. The retreat consisted of three conferences of twenty minutes each plus a homily each day. It ended Saturday morning, August 15. I have given dozens of retreats in a variety of places, but this was one of the most memorable.

The next day Sunday, August 16, I was driven to Ben Gurion Airport at Lod, near Tel-Aviv, got through security with surprising ease by playing around with my primitive command of modern Hebrew, and after a three-hour five-minute flight landed at Fiumicino near Rome. I doubt if any other visitor to Israel that summer had had the opportunities I had had to get to know Israel and the persons who live there the way I had.

Reflections

Any casual visitor to Israel will be impressed by the “paths” that are visible in many places, especially in areas that can be designated “wilderness”. These paths have been there for thousands of years, and were very helpful in primitive times in making sure persons who trusted in them arrived at a safe destination. These paths have found their way into Sacred Scripture. See Psalm 16,11: “You will show me the path to life, abounding joy in your presence, the delights at your right hand forever”. (See also Proverbs 2,19; 5,6; 15,19; in the New Testament, John 14,6; Matthew 21,32; Acts 16,17.) In my time with the Basilian group a guide took advantage of our days in the Negev Desert to invite those of us who wished to sample the efficacy of just such a path. He called for volunteers and nine of us responded. He drove us to a point in the Negev that could justly be called a “wilderness”. He pointed out the beginnings of a path that cut through the sand and rocks, mainly by going along a ridge of low hills. He said that if we followed this path, in an hour or so we would eventually arrive at a caravanserai, that is, a place where caravans could spend the night, where there was fresh water and a place to keep camels. He said he would drive our small bus by a primitive road and meet us there, Off we went, trusting in his word that we would end well. All around us was the emptiness of the Negev under a blistering afternoon sun. On we trudged, enjoying the scenery but looking forward to our goal. Sure enough, after a little more than an hour our path descended abruptly and we found a well with fresh water and a network of low barriers (camels will not step over a barrier if it is a couple of feet high) and our guide, grinning at the wheel of our small bus. An excellent example of the purpose of our visit: seeing how experiencing what the Holy Land had to offer us could help our spiritual life as Christians.

After all I have seen of Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Israel I have much to reflect on as I try to be a good Christian.