

Travels with the Spirit: A Summer Travelogue Through the Book of Acts
Travel Testimony
“Travel Thoughts”
Carol Hasvold
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When I was a little girl, I loved hearing the Bible stories about Jesus and Abraham and all the others, but they had no reality to me. I heard place names such as Egypt or Israel or Bethlehem or Jerusalem, and it was like they were somewhere up in the sky. Even when I found the maps in the back of the Bible, the locations of the Bible stories did not seem to be connected to the real world.

Coming to Decorah, as a pastor’s wife and also as a Luther staff member, I was able to take one course per semester at Luther College free of tuition, and along with other interests I completed the requirements for a major in Anthropology.

At age 40 I was still strong and healthy, and when my two sons left for college I thought I needed to do something to stave off the “empty nest syndrome.” I joined Luther College archaeology teams for two summers excavating a Native American site near Mason City with Clark Mallam, and at Terrace Hill in Des Moines with Dale Henning. Then I decided to apply for a dig in Israel to put my work in archaeology more in the context of my family and my church. I worked as a graduate student and then as a staff member on a dig on the central plain of Israel for most of the summers of the 1980s.

We were excavating a tel, a town site built up through many centuries of occupation, destruction, and re-settlement. So, excavation is really exploring history in reverse. With pickaxe and shovel, whisk broom and trowel, we uncovered settlements from around 600 AD, back to nearly 4000 years ago, around 1800 BC.

At the earliest levels, we were uncovering a settlement which could be dated by Semitic pottery remains as about 1800 BC., the time when the Biblical story of Abraham and Sarah took place. The Abraham story gives a name and a family to a large movement of Semitic peoples making the transition from nomadic herders coming in from the Arabian desert, and becoming settled agriculturists in the land of Canaan.

Sieving the dirt as we excavated, we discovered carbonized remains of wheat, lentils and other grains showing that they had indeed become settled farmers. We also uncovered bones of sheep and goats, showing evidence of roasting and being scraped with tools, getting meat off the bones for a meal, and every day finding flint sickle blades, knives and scrapers, my specialty, the tools used in raising and processing the meats and grains. One of my favorite artifacts was an earthenware bowl about eight inches in diameter, with a pestle or grinding utensil still resting in it, just as if the housewife almost four thousand years ago had just stepped out of her kitchen.

On weekends our dig directors took our group of about 40 young men and women, both Christian and Jewish, to special sites around Israel. Especially meaningful were the weekends we spent up in the Galilee. We visited Nazareth, the town where Jesus grew up and probably worked as a carpenter with his father. We stayed in a youth hostel on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, and waded and swam along its shore as Jesus and his disciples and the thousands following him had done. On the north shore of the Sea we visited the ruins of the synagogue at Capernaum where Jesus read from the Torah scrolls and said, "Today the Scripture has been fulfilled in your presence." Nearby is the Church of the Beatitudes, built in the early 20th century to mark the event of Jesus' preaching and speaking, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth; blessed are the poor in heart, for theirs is the Kingdom of God." No one knows where Jesus stood when he was preaching to the crowds or where he fed the five thousand. But if it was not on this hillside it was on the next, so it still gives reality to the Biblical account. In his lifetime Jesus had a considerable following especially among the poor and the working class of people. But he was not crowned or elected to anything, and he died in disgrace, no monument was erected in his honor. Only in 400 A.D. when the wife of the Emperor Constantine was converted to Christianity and went to Israel inquiring of the people, where does tradition say that Jesus walked or preached or performed his miracles, only then did the events of Jesus' life become attached to specific locations.

My husband Pastor Paul came with me on the dig for two seasons. After each work day he would sit with a Bible and a road map of Israel, marking on the map the location of both Old Testament and New Testament stories. At the end of the season we would rent a car and drive around Israel and the West Bank and even into Syria and take photos of the locations of palaces or battles fought by the Old Testament kings as well as where Jesus restored sight to a blind man or cast demons into a herd of swine. No site was too obscure for Paul. We even have a slide of the stub of a city gate of the town where Samson's Delilah grew up, and of the corn field where tradition says that Amos was plowing when he was called by God to be a prophet.

What I'm trying to say is that what I learned in traveling in Israel was the reality of the people and places in the Biblical stories. It is a miracle in itself that the stories were carried down from generation to generation for hundreds of years before they were written down. Certainly the acts of God in the Old Testament, and the life, teachings and ultimate sacrifice of Jesus on the cross are the core of our faith. But it very much enriched and deepened my faith to learn something of the lives of the people and events at the heart of the Judeo-Christian tradition.