

## Day 5

Moving day ... bags outside our door by 6:45 to be loaded onto the bus for transport to the next – and final – hotel. We left Nazareth at 8:00 for a 2 ½ hour ride to Bethlehem where we would spend the day. From there, we travelled a short distance but a long time due to heavy traffic, to our last hotel site, the Cassia Hotel (formerly the King Solomon Hotel) in Jerusalem.

Todd began our trip with Open Our Eyes and Laura Katherine led us in the Traveler's Prayer. Our shepherds for the day are Todd Arant and Kathy Turner, and our chaplain is Kathie Wilkinson. Since we are headed to Bethlehem, we had to add a few Christmas carols to set the tone for the day!

Rula reminded us of some things we had already learned. Nazareth means flower, the church tower appears as an upside down flower with the spreading leaves signifying Christ covering the entire world. Several people mentioned to her their surprise at the number and size of the mountains in Israel. She started naming the ones we know from the Bible – Mt Precipitation , Mt Tabor, Mt Carmel, Mt Hermon, Mt Zion, Mt of Olives, and The Temple Mt, just to name some of the more recognizable ones. From all the walking/climbing yesterday, we now have a greater appreciation of the difficulty in Jesus' day of travel done by foot!

We learned from Rula that military service is compulsory at age 18 for all males (32 months) and females (24 months). Generally those who have completed their service are eligible to be re-called to active duty up until the age of 40. There are some exemptions to compulsory service due to religious, immigrant status, and physical issues.

Like one of the bank commercials where the weekend starts two days early, it is Thursday here and the weekend traffic leaving the city has already begun. Rula explained there are three days of the week that are recognized in Israel as sabbath days. The Muslims worship on Friday, so Thursday begins their weekend. For the Jews, sabbath begins at Friday sundown until the first evening star appears on Saturday – which makes their weekend be Friday and Saturday. And then the Christians have our same Saturday/Sunday weekend with sabbath on Sunday.

There are three sects of Jewish people in Israel.

The ultra conservative Jews are the Hasidic Jews. The men wear the black hats with long hair curls. They do not interact with other Jewish sects and do not work. They spend their time studying the torah/in prayer and are supported by the Israeli government. No military service is required of the, and they pay no taxes. They typically have 10 – 12 children and their population in Israel is increasing. On the sabbath, they will do no work, not drive a vehicle, no cooking, walking to the synagogue, and no activities other than at home worshiping when not in the synagogue. Shopping is doubled on Friday and two meals are prepared; the Sadar meal for Friday evening, and a noonday meal for Saturday.

The orthodox Jews also observe the sabbath, but they own and operate businesses, may work on Saturday if necessary, pay taxes, and serve in the military.

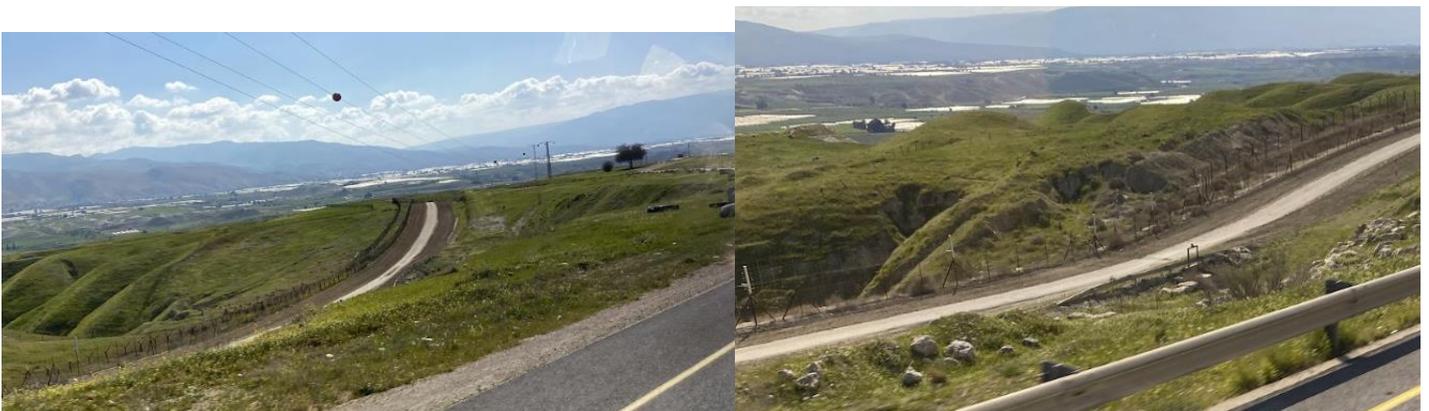
The secular Jews work very hard, pay the most taxes, and must serve in the military. This group is not devoutly religious, rather they consider being Jewish as a cultural matter.

The secular Jews have many issues with the Hasidic Jews as they do not feel the Hasidic carry their weight in society. About 2 years ago, the supreme court held that the Hasidic Jews must begin serving in the military like all other citizens. A protest was held that shut down the highway system. The backlash was so great, the law as repealed. The government in control needs the vote of the Hasidic group so concessions were made.

We traveled the highway moving through the Judean Valley which we saw yesterday from the top of Mt Carmel. In the distance we could see Mt Gilboa where King Saul and his two sons were killed in the battle against the Philistines (I Samuel 31). Alongside the road we saw a railroad track. There is only one rail system in the country plus a light rail system operating in Jerusalem.

Water from a natural spring runs in channels beside the road which is used for crop irrigation on the valley floor. Numerous date tree nurseries are located there and Rula described the life cycle of the date tree – which can only be started from a shoot growing from a mature tree. The shoot is covered in soil and a wool sack until time to transplant. It takes a minimum of 5 years before a date tree begins producing dates and the tree can live up to 150 years with minimal need for water.

Our first realization of a major change in topography was seeing the Gilead mountain range appear when we looked east. This was our first realization of how close we were to the border of Jordan and the Palestinian territory. As we drove further down the Judean Valley we arrived at the demarcation of No Man's Land – a border fence which runs beside the highway we were taking to Jerusalem. Prior to the 1967 Six-Day War, The Jordan River was the border between the Palestinian and Jewish territories. The fence was erected in 2000 and the No Man's Land area between the fences were/are filled with land mines.



We passed through several check points without even having to stop. Our bus carries both Israeli (yellow) and Palestine (white/green) license tags which allow us to cross the borders. There are over 500 checkpoints between the Jordan/Israel borders.



In Israel, there are three zones within the country of Israel which control the territories.

Zone A – All Palestinian civil and military control – Ex cities of Jericho and Bethlehem.

Zone B – Palestinian civil control, but Israeli military control – ex the highway to Jerusalem.

Zone C – Israeli civil and military control, all of the country except A and B zones.

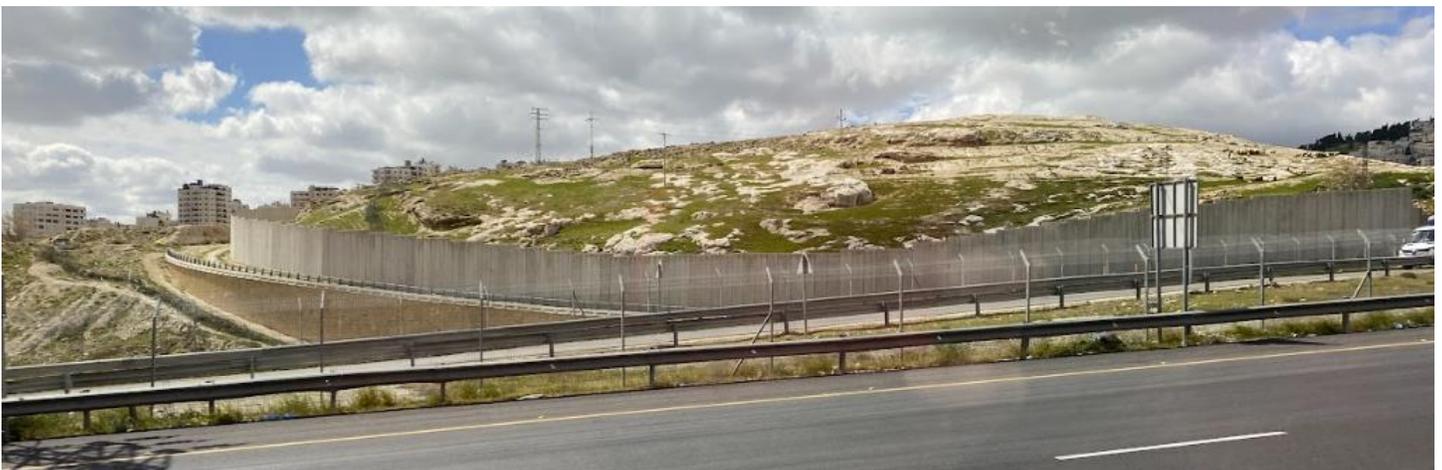
From the Judean Valley, we traveled through the desert and then into the Jordan Valley. We actually glimpsed the city of Jericho and the Dead Sea from a far distance – we will see both up close and personal on a later day.



In the desert sections, we saw Bedouin shepherds who are indigenous people. They are a semi-nomadic community that historically engaged in sheep and goat herding and agriculture. They are famous for their dairy products, especially the cheeses from goat milk. The Bedouins live in tent village, are Muslim but speak a unique dialect, do not interact with other Muslims, have up to four wives each, and generally have 12-14 children - all living together in a family compound. Most use donkeys and camels for transportation [we have a camel ride in our future!].



Jerusalem is 1,000 ft below sea level, and the Dead Sea is 1,300 ft below – the lowest point on earth. We entered Jerusalem and saw 30' high separation wall which surrounds the entire city. It was built in 2002 to separate Palestinians from Jewish people. It also surrounds Bethlehem – and Rachel's tomb, which is a major Jewish holy site, is located outside the wall. There is a special permit available only the documented Jewish citizens to pass through to the grave site for worship and prayer. The wall have been referred to as the wall of tears due to so many families separated by the fence. The prayer is for one day to see the wall come down just as the Berlin wall was dismantled and Germany was reunited.





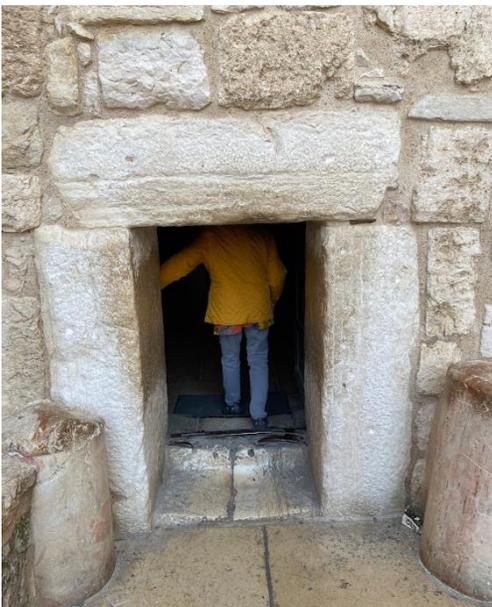
Once we reached Bethlehem, we first went to a Christian-owned souvenir shop which carried exquisite jewelry, art, and olive wood articles. Numerous mementos were purchased – be sure to ask your friends/family what they brought back for you!



Lunch of traditional sandwiches was served next door and then we begin moving toward the Church of the Nativity. While the distance was very short, the traffic was horrendous – it took over an hour to get to the bus station to disembark and walk about 4 block – up a VERY steep hill – to the basilica.

The Church of the Nativity is located in Bethlehem in West Bank Palestinian territories. The grotto believed to be the exact location where Jesus was born is the oldest site continuously used as a place of worship in Christianity, and the basilica is the oldest major church in the Holy Land.

The church was originally commissioned by Constantine the Great a short time after his mother Helena's visit to Jerusalem and Bethlehem in 325. That original basilica was likely built around 333 destroyed during a revolt in 529. A new basilica was built around 540 the emperor who added some areas but preserved the original character of the first building. It still stands today with constant maintenance and restoration required. One of the major changes from the original design required the main opening to be reduced to prevent large animals and carts from entering the building. The door frame is so small you have to bow to enter – it is call the Gate of Humility.



Once inside the church, it was about a 2 hour wait to get down to the grotto to see the manger location.





The fact the birthplace was not a house was reinforced as we saw the actual cave/grotto carved out with an area to house the animals. Over the site is a 14-point star which represents the 14 generations from David to Jesus as recounted in the genealogy found in the book of Matthew.



The manger.



Many question the authenticity of the grotto location as the actual birthplace of Jesus. Several substantiating reasons point to this site – the Bible’s gospel writings placing the event in Bethlehem are historically accepted as true and factual religious history – in 135 the Emperor Hadrian had the site above the grotto converted into a worship place for Adonis to remove any trace of Christian worship of Jesus - in 248 Origen (considered the father of Christian church) wrote about the site, and - numerous grave sites containing infants were found in the area which corresponds to the slaughter of the innocents by Herod after learning of the birth of Jesus.

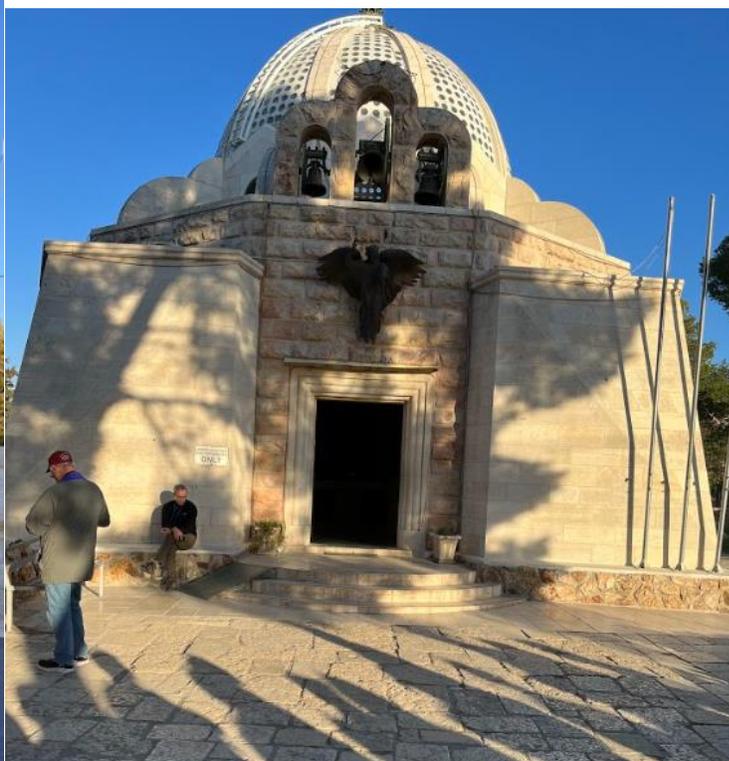
The basilica is owned by three church authorities – the Greek Orthodox (most of the building and furnishings), the Armenians, and Roman Catholics – with Coptic and Syriac sects having access to rights of worship.

The Catholics do not have any space inside the basilica, but do own St. Catherine’s Cathedral next door. It is built over the top of 3 caves where the writer Jerome lived for 30 years. He is famous for translating the Bible into Latin (the Vulgate) from Greek and Hebrew. It took him over 30 years and he is buried beneath the church in his cave. His statute stands in front of the church.



Christmas is celebrated 3 times each year at this site. Western Christianity uses the Gregorian calendar date of December 25<sup>th</sup>. Eastern Christianity uses the Julian calendar and celebrates on January 7<sup>th</sup>. The Armenian Christianity calculates the date as Jan 6<sup>th</sup>, but celebrates using the corresponding Gregorian calendar date of Jan 19<sup>th</sup>.

After leaving the Nativity Church, we rode a short distance to the Shepherds' Field Chapel or the Sanctuary of the Gloria in Excelsis Deo. This is the place tradition holds the angels first announced the birth of Christ.



A 4<sup>th</sup> century monastery was built on the site, but ruins from a 7<sup>th</sup> century destruction by the Persians were destroyed in the 8<sup>th</sup> century by Muslims. The site remained empty until the current church was built by Franciscans in 1953.

EXCAVATIONS OF  
IV-V-VI CENTURY  
BYZANTINE CHURCH  
AND MONASTERY





At the end of this tour, we rode to our hotel, checked in, and enjoyed a wonderful meal in the main dining room.

We will have a very full day tomorrow in Old Town with an early 7:30 start. We are blessed with a fabulous view from our hotel of the ancient Western Wailing Wall, which we visit tomorrow. Much more traveling to come!

