

Grounding the Bible: The role of Biblical pilgrimage

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In recent years there has been a growing movement of Biblically-focussed study tours to countries such as Jordan, Israel/Palestine, Greece, Malta and Italy. (Sadly, Egypt has to be left off this list at present.) The practice of pilgrimages to the “Holy Land” can be traced back to the Empress Helena c250-c330 (mother of Constantine the Great) and her journey to the Holy Land to identify sites and relics in 326-328 CE.

Such “theo-tourism” has a significant positive impact on participants’ formation, education and discipleship. There are predicable outcomes from participating in such study tours or pilgrimages:

- Understanding of the significance of the physical environment as background to Biblical narratives.
- Recognition of the multi-layered religious traditions that form part of the two millennia of Christian devotion associated with presumed Biblical sites.
- An enhanced understanding of interfaith relations, especially Muslim-Jewish-Christian.
- An understanding of Christian religious traditions other than our own, notably the Orthodox tradition.

Examples of the significance of the physical environment include a sense of the large distances in Turkey traversed by Paul (eg hours in a bus between gaps in verses in Acts), and the relatively tiny size of the Sea of Galilee (eg that many of the places mentioned can be seen from one another, such as Bethsaida and Capernaum).

Multi-layered religious traditions are reflected especially in places such as churches at and near Mt Nebo (Jordan), the Church of the Nativity (Bethlehem) and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (Jerusalem). Even though some protest that we can’t know where events took place, their objections are often transformed by entering into an awareness of the accumulated devotion of Christian worshippers and pilgrims over 16 or more centuries. This relates closely to gaining an understanding of Orthodox tradition.

Inevitably as groups travel within the State of Israel and the West Bank (Palestine), people meet locals of the three Abrahamic faiths, as well as other religion such as Druze. There is the opportunity to see housing standards, the closeness of neighbourhoods and sacred sites (eg the Temple Mount / al-Haram al-Sharif), the wall, bomb shelters, and border crossings. It’s important to take the chance to talk to ordinary locals (eg Arab Christians in Bethlehem) as well as more formal conversations with church representatives. Everyone has a story; everyone has an opinion.

Orthodox Christianity is represented in historical ways by the almost overwhelming interior of Hagia Sophia (Istanbul) and the cave churches of Cappadocia (Turkey),

home of the Cappadocian Fathers; Basil the Great of Caesarea (Kayseri) and his friends become companions. Sites such as Cappadocia and Nicea (modern Iznik) serve to ground travellers, for instance giving a place to the Creed; singing “Holy, Holy, Holy” (tune: Nicea) by “the crystal sea” is, surprisingly for me, some people’s highlights. I am often struck by the foreignness of what seemed familiar from the perspective of text only.

Living monasteries and convents in places such as Meteora (Greece) convey a sense of continuity with the past, but also provoke questions of contemporary sustainability for religious community.

In addition, being in sacred geographical space creates the opportunity for unanticipated impacts on participants, such as:

- Spiritually transformative moments.
- Political awareness, both:
 - Ancient: Appreciation of Paul’s assault on the Roman imperial cult;
 - Contemporary: Questions of rights and justice.

Spiritually transformative moments often happen in worship in particular places. Notable examples include the Eucharist in a quiet place on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, or in a church in Konya (Turkey, = ancient Iconium visited by Paul) tended by a pair of Italian nuns committed to hospitality for Christian travellers. These two nuns also provide spiritual comfort for Iraqi and other refugees living in the area. One pair of questions that worship focussed on near the end of a tour was, “What has been the most significant moment on this journey?” and “How will you live differently as a result of these experiences?” Be prepared to be surprised!

Other spiritually transforming moments occur when standing in the actual places where events occurred, such as the Areopagus in Athens (Acts 17:16-34) or the Theatre in Ephesus (Acts 19:21-41). The Areopagus speech comes alive when hearing the words “God does not live in shrines made by human hands” while standing under the bulk of the temples of the Parthenon.

One example of political awareness was when a minister stood looking at the immense bulk of the Imperial temple dedicated to Caesar in Pisidian Antioch, and saying “And Paul said to THIS, Jesus, not Caesar, is Lord!”

While I’ve not had direct experience of Biblical travel with indigenous Australians, I understand that being physically present in the desert and hills of Biblical Israel is a powerful experience. Some quotes:

The indigenous people of Australia often have a strong sense of the importance of their land and a recognition of the connection they have with it.

It is this connection that can make a trip back to the Holy Land of Israel so special.

“It really resonated with who I am as an indigenous person in Australia,” Paula Cogill of the Bundjulumg tribe in Casino New South Wales said.

“As aboriginal people we are very relational people and my heart was to meet some of the Palestinian Christians, which we will be able to do on this trip,” Paula said.

“For me it was transforming - it really felt like I was literally walking on the word. Every place we went to was significant and purposeful and provided growth and even some stretching,” Paula said.

<http://www.onechurch.org.au/news/april-2015/april15-articles/item/634-unique-tour-of-israel-through-indigenous-eyes/634-unique-tour-of-israel-through-indigenous-eyes>

accessed 10/11/15

What does it take to tell a rich, theologically dense story using another language?

This has been the challenge for a team of translators from the remote APY Lands, who for the last four years have been assiduously working to translate the Hebrew stories of the Old Testament from English into Pitjantjatjara.

Earlier this month, a group of 15 Pitjantjatjara people working with the project made the long trip from the remote north west of South Australia to Israel to follow a loosely-chronological tour through the settings of the Bible.

Tour group leader Paul Eckert, who has worked on the Bible project for three decades, said the idea was to familiarise the translators with the land of Jesus and Moses.

"It was designed to give them a taste of the country about which they would be translating," he said.

"I guess being people of the land themselves who are very aware of the land and what's growing on it, to be able to feel it and see the countryside where a lot of these stories happened would be really helpful."

...

And there are other, more abstract concepts that need to be described.

"We have to sort of look at each situation where we have a complex word and break it down into its component meaning, and see if there's an equivalent in Pitjantjatjara, and if there's not you have to translate it as a phrase," he said.

"So for example, when it comes to ritual washing, we noticed when we were travelling around there'd be a whole lot of places for ritual washing for the Jews, and it's not just for washing your hands, it's a spiritual or ceremonial washing.

"So we would have to make a little phrase of that rather than just use the word 'washing'.

"So in Pitjantjatjara we would have to use something like 'washing for the purpose of being able to worship' or 'being able to be acceptable to God', something like that."

<http://www.abc.net.au/local/photos/2015/09/25/4319654.htm>

Accessed 9/11/15

Finally, the concept of Biblical pilgrimage is also a powerful tool for spiritual formation even in our own physical location, eg retreat programs. Having travelled in the actual locations lends a greater spiritual sensitivity when leading retreats based around mountain top imagery or Mark's "other side".

In conclusion:

- Biblical pilgrimage or "theo-tourism" does have a profound effect on participants' Biblical knowledge as well as spiritual depth. This is in both predictable ways as well as creating the space for the unintended to happen.
- Travelling in a group as transient intentional community provides the space to re-evaluate priorities and life directions before returning to ordinary life.
- Middle East and Mediterranean travel exposes people to a broader range of Christian traditions than most would experience at home.
- Such travel also opens people to the political dimensions of the region, both ancient and contemporary.

Selected resources:

Mayes, A.D. **Beyond the Edge: Spiritual transitions for adventurous souls.** London: SPCK, 2013.

Suchet, D. **In the Footsteps of St Paul (DVD).** CTVC/BBC, 2011.

Suchet, D. **In the Footsteps of St Peter (DVD).** CTVC/BBC, 2014.

Walker, P. **In the Steps of Jesus: An illustrated guide to the places of the Holy Land.** Oxford: Lion, 2006.

Walker, P. **In the Steps of Saint Paul: An illustrated guide to Paul's journeys.** Oxford: Lion, 2008.