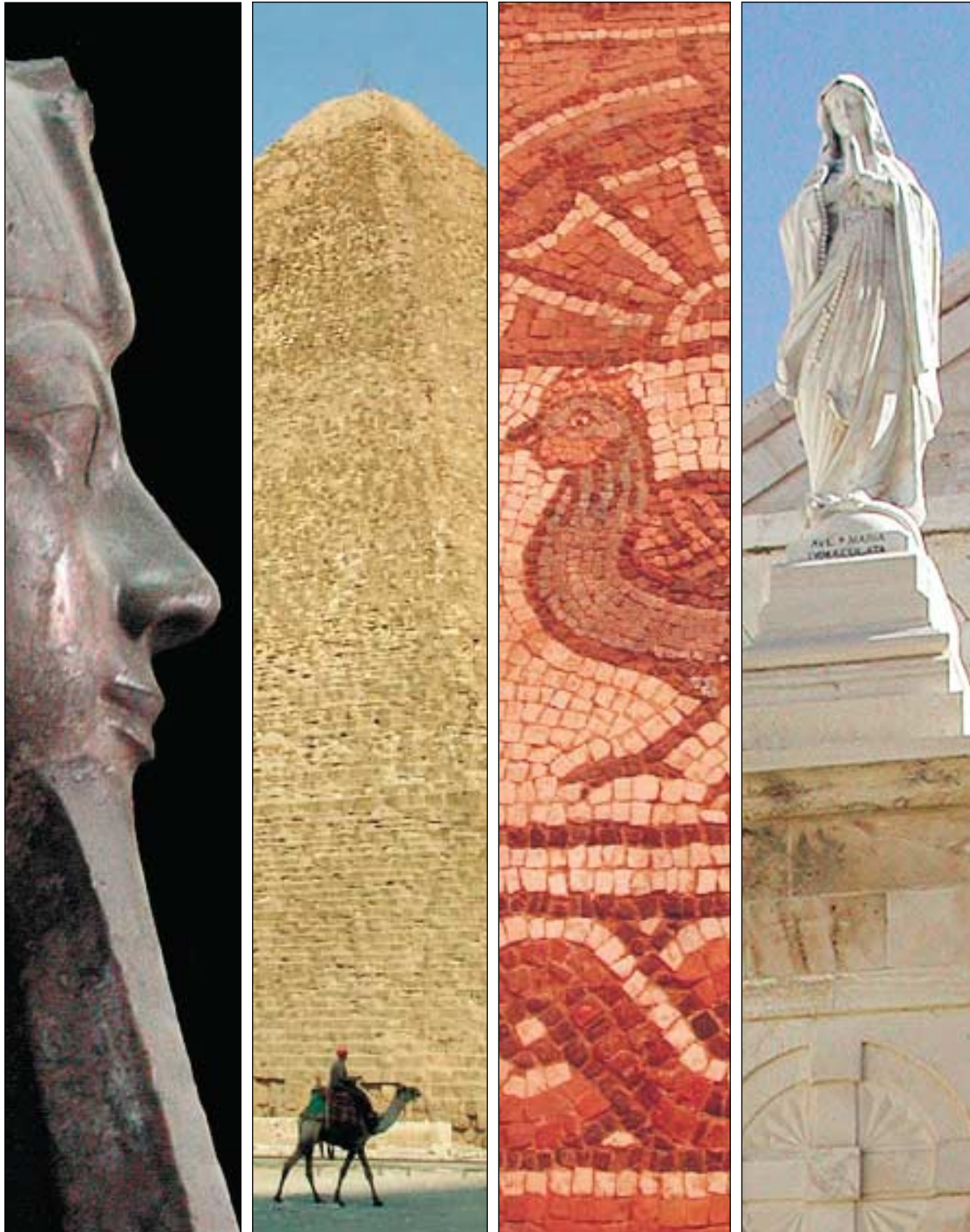


# From Egypt to Bethlehem

A graphic narrative

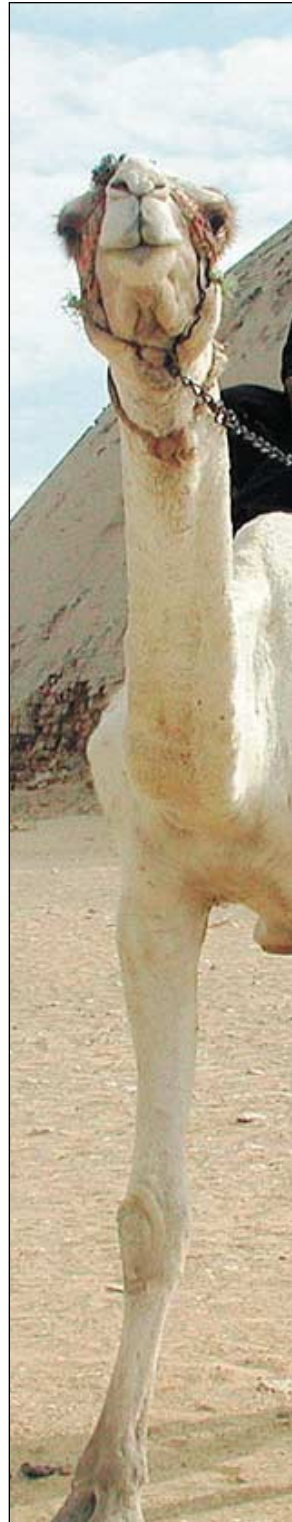
by Tim Hiltabiddle



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This document contains photos and observations made during a trip to Egypt, Jordan, Israel and the West Bank in November 2002.

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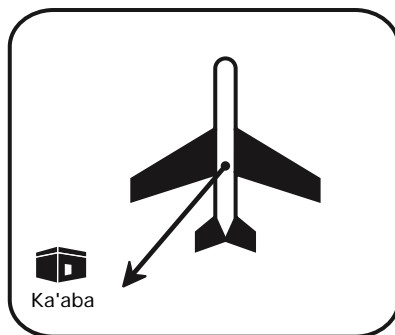
# From Egypt to Bethlehem

a graphic narrative

## Monday, 12 November 2002

39,000 FT. OVER THE MEDITERRANEAN OCEAN • Royal Jordanian Airlines has kindly agreed to let us spend the next 11 hours in its Airbus 340. The flashing map on the movie screen shows that we're now over the Greek Islands. While I slept, we flew over the North Atlantic, crossed the center of France and the length of Italy. We'll be landing in just over an hour.

I am part of a group of eleven people traveling to Egypt, Jordan, Israel, and the West Bank organized by The Society for Biblical Studies and lead by the Rev. Peter Miano. Peter was the the minister at the Methodist church that I attended in Arlington, MA. This journey is the result of a barter: I designed his brochure and in return, I'm going on one of his trips.



### Which way to Mecca?

In addition to showing the time, flight path and altitude, the screen also show us "Which way to Mecca". When Muslims pray five times a day

they must face Mecca, their holy city in Saudi Arabia. So the airline displays a helpful diagram with an arrow showing the orientation of the plane to Mecca.

At least half the people on the plane appear to be Arabs. Many Arab women are completely covered, except for their faces. Younger women tend to not be so traditionally dressed. For instance, an attractive woman in her 20's across the aisle is wearing a scarf around her head but instead of a long, flowing Arab robe, she wears a long-sleeved white sweater, blue jeans, and a cool pair of Merrell slip-on shoes.



An Arab man two rows ahead of me has an unlit cigarette in his mouth. I wonder: Is he actually going to light that thing on the plane?! Maybe he

just likes the comfort of having a cig in his mouth – his pacifier. Maybe he just wants to be ready to light up the second we get off the plane. He wouldn't want to waste precious seconds searching for a cigarette when he could be using that time puffing away, would he?

### Coffee, Tea, or Marc Antony?

The flight attendants on the Royal Jordanian flight are stunning. The woman waiting on me looks like the younger sister of Catherine Zeta-Jones, and another one has kind of a Cleopatra thing going on – not that anyone really knows what Cleopatra looked like. Maybe I should instead say that she has an Elizabeth Taylor thing going on?!

All communication on the plane is bilingual, both Arabic and English. Arabic writing is so beautiful, so fluid, so lyrical. It reads right to left across the page. A magazine on the plane reads in English from the "front" (left to right) and then, the same articles read in Arabic from the "back" (right to left). I enjoy looking at the letterforms, even though I have no clue what they say.

Our plane is about finished with its journey across the Mediterranean. We'll soon be over Israel, then Jordan. As we prepare to land, the Arab Marlboro Man now has his cigarette tucked behind his ear. How convenient!



## Tuesday, 12 November 2002

AMMAN, JORDAN • This morning, we have a quick flight from Jordan to Egypt. We had a brief overnight stay at a modern hotel near the airport, 30 km. outside of the city of Amman. It made for a simple, easy way to enter into the Middle East before engaging the anticipated insanity of Cairo.



The "City of the Dead"

We took our Monday dinner and Tuesday breakfast at the hotel cafeteria. At dinner, we initially had the place to ourselves. Then, halfway through the meal (of lamb and rice, chicken, hummus, and other salads), a flood of Arabs came pouring into the room, wearing flowing robes, hats, and slippers. Here we were, in a stark, white, modern, brightly-lit cafeteria surrounded by Arabs in their beautiful traditional clothing. It was an odd contrast to me, the first of many I will experience in the coming days.

Wednesday, 13 November 2002



CAIRO, EGYPT • Toto, we are NOT in Kansas anymore! We are now in a Middle-Eastern Land of Oz that cannot be believed unless you see it for yourself.

Cairo is HUGE, the 3rd biggest city in the world (behind Mexico City and Tokyo.) After landing at the airport,

we met up with our guide "Osama" (no lie!) and our driver "Hussein" (I swear I'm not making this up!) We boarded our chartered bus (it's big and comfortable, like a Greyhound) and headed for The Citadel and the Mohammed Ali mosque. No, not THAT Mohammed Ali. This guy was an important ruler in Egypt during the early 19th century. He came from Turkey and was instrumental in modernizing the country. And no, he was never a boxer.



The Mohammed Ali Mosque

The mosque is gorgeous and the view of the city of Cairo both wonderful and terrible. Wonderful because we are high on a ridge and can see the pyramids of



Urban buildings in Cairo

Giza in the distance. Terrible because it is a disturbingly graphic view of the poverty that exists in this city. Most people seem to live in sad, decrepit dwellings that appear highly unsanitary.

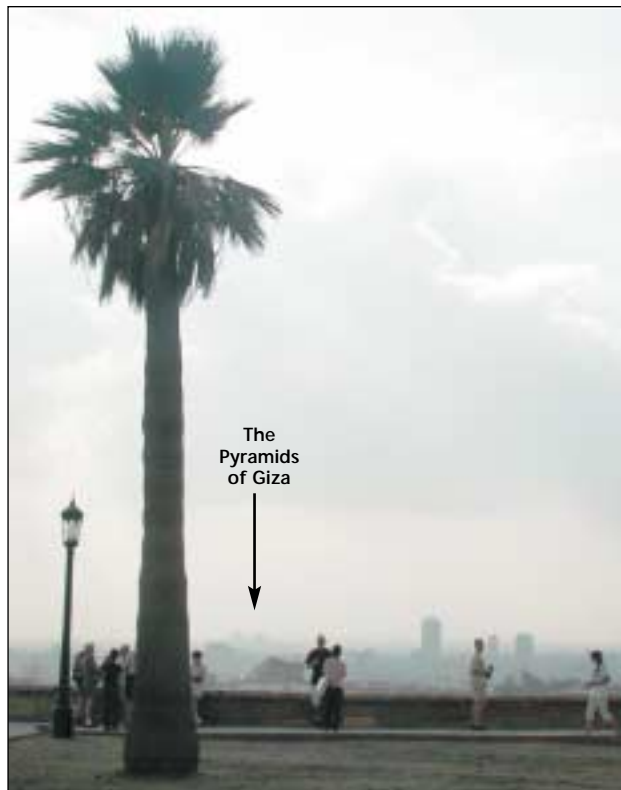
Even worse is "The City of the Dead" – a vast, ancient cemetery filled with above-ground tombs in which 20,000 homeless people live.

Yes, they *live* in the cemetery. Osama told us that the government built the homeless new housing further out from the city, but they keep coming back to live here. Because of the location? I don't know. Location, location, location. It is heartbreaking or, as they say in Arabic, "my heart is crying." The filth, the squalor, the congestion... it is almost beyond comprehension. I feel so conspicuous in my wealth and privilege as I look through the windows of our bus upon the streets and people of Cairo.

We made our way to the Cosmopolitan (our hotel) after a harrowing, death-defying drive through the streets of Cairo. I have never seen more aggressive, reckless driving anywhere. They make New York drivers look like wimps. We're talkin' bumper cars!



The Cosmopolitan Hotel



View of Cairo from the Mohammed Ali Mosque; the Pyramids of Giza are in the distance.

We went for several walks near our hotel in central Cairo, the business district of the city. It is much more modern and developed than the area around the Mohammed Ali mosque. The store owners push their merchandise the same way that Egyptians drive: aggressive, in your face, don't take "no" for an answer. But sometimes they can also be quite charming. One man, who turned out to be the owner of a perfume shop, convinced us to come, sit down in his store, and "visit" while he tried valiantly and creatively to sell us perfume. He was subtle, he was clever, and he was friendly. Finally, as nothing else worked, he tried to appeal to the masculinity of one of my companions: "Tell me, man to man, why you not want to buy my perfume?"



We are foreigners with wallets. There have been precious few of us in the Middle East for the past two years, since the beginning of the latest *Intifada* (the Palestinian uprising against the Israeli occupation of the West Bank & Gaza). Everywhere we go, they are desperate to sell to us their stuff. But it doesn't feel unsafe. Osama said that the crime rate is very, very low (much lower than in America). To commit a crime would bring shame to both the individual and his or her family, so they rarely do it. And I have not seen a single panhandler. No one is asking for anything for free. They just want to sell their goods and services. Desperately.

Regardless, I've learned not to make eye contact with the vendors. It encourages them and gives them "permission" to assault you with their sales pitch. But at least they are earning a living. They are striving to stay out of poverty. How mad can you really be? Boundaries are certainly in order, but a little compassion and understanding seems important, too.

In spite of all this (or perhaps *because* of all this?) Cairo is an amazing place. It is an exciting place. It is so alive, the energy is so high, and it is so different from any place else I've ever experienced. It's fascinating and stimulating, like visiting another planet. Yet the western influence has crept into the Egyptian culture



Ever wondered how to say "Drink Coke" in Arabic?

in many ways... I've seen Coca Cola, McDonald's, Nike, Ford, Kentucky Fried Chicken, CNN, Pizza Hut, and New York Jets baseball caps, to name a few. Many Egyptians speak English and are sometimes willing to take American dollars as payment for their goods. These are examples of the cultural blending that has characterized this region for centuries. The world gets a little bit smaller and more homogeneous every day as various influences blend together.

Thursday, 14 November 2002

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FROM CAIRO TO THE SINAI PENINSULA •

The last two days have been wild. In 48 hours, I have:

1) seen six major pyramids at Giza, Saqqara, and Dahshur while driving up and down the Nile valley and through various villages to get there 2) caught a bug and experienced 24 hours of nausea, diarrhea, headache, and body ache... DON'T DRINK THE WATER! 3) stopped at an Anglican church in Cairo and chatted with Dr. Ramzi, who is an Egyptian Christian 4) spent 3 1/2 hours in the Egyptian Museum and seen treasures from the tomb of King Tutankhamun, and 5) rode our bus for 6 hours into the heart of the Sinai Desert to reach our hotel near St. Catherine's Monastery at the foot of Mt. Musa, known in the Bible and elsewhere as Mt. Sinai.

And here we are. It's been hard to find time to write. We've been so frantically busy every day and I've felt like crap. But here are some quick impressions of the past few days before I fall asleep.

### The First Pyramids

There's quite a variety of pyramids, starting with the oldest one: the pyramid at Saqqara. Technically, it's not a pyramid since its sides are stepped instead of sloped, but spiritually it is the logical place to start when learning about the chronological development of pyramids. It's really big, really cool, and really old –



The Step Pyramid at Saqqara

2800 BC, to be specific. It dawns on me that our historic tours of Lexington and Concord are pathetic by comparison. 225 years old? Try 4,800 years old.

At this site, we are introduced to a new type of Egyptian sales technique: vendors on camels. They follow you around wherever you go, trying to entice you to buy a camel ride. Our guide warns us not to fall for the sales pitch that promises a “free” camel

ride. Evidently, it's free to get on the camel and take a ride, but it's *not* free to get *off* the camel!

### The Egyptian Tourist Police

We were the only ones at the next pyramid site at Dahshur with the exception of several Egyptian “Tourist Police”. Theoretically, they are there to protect the pyramids and ensure our safety. But they also have another agenda...



Egyptian Tourist Police

“Where you from?” they ask.

“America,” I respond.

“Oh, AMERICA! America Number 1!” he says in an extremely friendly and excited way while giving me the ‘thumbs up’ sign.

Hey! We're bonding in our mutual admiration for the USA!

I have a new Egyptian friend! And he likes America!

Then he asks me if I want him to take my picture – with the pyramid or, perhaps with his camel.

“Sure!” I say innocently, surprised by his helpfulness.

They are, after all, Tourist Police, so why shouldn't they be helpful?

I smile broadly, the picture is taken, I retrieve my camera, and as I start to walk away, my friendly Tourist Policeman holds his hand out and rubs his



The Bent Pyramid at Dahshur



An Egyptian taxi

fingers together. Being an expert in sign language, I immediately recognize this as the international sign for “I’d like you to put some cash in my hand in exchange for the amazing service that I just provided to you.” (I’m quick that way, you know.)

The “Bent” Pyramid at Dahshur was the first to have sloped sides. Scholars speculate that the angle was changed from 54° to 45° halfway through construction to keep it from collapsing on itself. The pharaoh was likely not pleased with this unique design. The pyramid was abandoned and a new one was built a few miles away.

### *Into the Bowels*

The other pyramid at Dahshur, called the “Red” Pyramid, was built for the pharaoh after the neighboring Bent Pyramid was abandoned. We were allowed to go inside. First we climbed up steps on the outside of the pyramid that took us to an entrance about 1/3 of the way up. Upon entering, we climbed down a shaft that descended at a 30° angle and required us to crouch and squat while waddling downhill. It was an uncomfortable way to maneuver the human body.

After a 7 or 8 minute climb down into the bowels of the pyramid, we finally entered the first of three cathedral-shaped chambers – each about 15 ft. high. All three chambers were connected by various passageways, steps and corridors. Each corridor smelled progressively worse. The last chamber reeked like a urinal that hadn’t been cleaned in years.

To get to the pyramids at Dahshur, we had to drive for over an hour “up” the Nile Valley, which actually



The Red Pyramid at Dahshur

means traveling south, towards the river's source. We passed through the village of Dahshur which, to my eye, looked quite ramshackled and rundown.

But initial impression is that the people are getting along fine. It's certainly not a Somalia-like situation with starving kids in the street. But it still feels like a Third World country in many ways. What have I seen before that comes close to this? The border towns of Mexico or perhaps parts of West Virginia, New Mexico or South Florida. Maybe the Bronx. But I have never seen anything on this scale.

It occurs to me to be careful not to project my western sensibilities and standards upon the Middle East. At the very least, I can say that they don't seem to value "beauty" in the way that we do in the west. Egyptians consistently leave old refuse, scrap, and building materials lying about in piles in their yards and fields. It doesn't seem to bother them. They don't feel the need to clean things up or provide care and attention to their homes and property.

We also saw hundreds of "unfinished" buildings. These flat-topped commercial and residential structures have steel rods sticking out of their roofs, ostensibly to allow them to some day add another story. Osama said that the real reason for this is because they don't have to pay taxes on the building until it is finished. So, if it's never "finished" ...



The fertile Nile Valley; the village of Dahshur; "unfinished" buildings in Cairo

### *The Big Ones*

In Saqqara and Dahshur, the pyramids are solitary structures, allowed by their surroundings to have a sense of dignity and majesty.

In the solitude and serenity of the desert, one can feel a connection to the past since very little of the present has intruded. They have weathered the last 4,800 years quite nicely.

Giza is a whole different story. It's impossible to call it a tourist trap when the pyramids themselves are so incredible. But the site was swarming with hundreds and hundreds of people. Dozens of large buses were also conspicuously parked in between the two Great Pyramids while a strange modern structure (office space, I think?) squatted at the base of the northern one. It was jarring, especially after the tranquility of Dahshur. The situation is exacerbated by the sprawl of Cairo that creeps up to the doorstep of the pyramids.

A five minute walk to the south afforded a better view of the pyramids and a little peace and quiet. The scale is staggering, and the fact that they were built 4,600 years ago is mind boggling. Until the 19th century, the Great Pyramid was the tallest building in the world. It is said to contain over 2 million blocks of stone, with some stones at the base weighing as much as 15 tons. Fifteen tons per stone! With no machines of any kind for fabrication or transportation!



The Great Pyramids at Giza

### *The Sphinx at Giza*

The Sphinx was carved out of an outcrop of natural rock around 2500 BC. It is thought to be the face of Khafre, the Pharaoh for whom the Great Pyramid was built. It originally had a nose and a beard, both of which have fallen off.

The Sphinx was our last stop at the end of a long day. We made it just under the wire before today's early closing time. Muslims are currently observing Ramadan. This month-long religious tradition requires that they fast all day. Then, at sunset, they eat a huge meal. This has cramped our style a bit since all sites close at 3pm to allow Muslims to rush home and eat. Hence, we were serenaded during most of



The Sphinx



our visit to the Sphinx by the Tourist Police loudly blowing their whistles, over and over and over again, encouraging us to leave promptly. It gave new meaning to the word "shrill".



### The Egyptian Museum

If the items from King Tutankhamun's tomb were made today, in the year 2002, they would be breathtaking. But when you consider that they were created 3800 years ago for a relatively *minor* king, they are astounding. Just imagine what they must have created for the major kings like Ramses III! We will never know,



King Tutankhamun's solid gold coffin

since those tombs were completely looted over the centuries. Somehow, King Tut's tomb went undetected all these years until it was rediscovered by English Archaeologist Howard Carter in 1922. That's the only reason that we have these artifacts today. The jewelry is gorgeous and intricate, the solid gold coffin is magnificent, and the famous funeral mask is sublime.



Queen Nefertiti

The Egyptian Museum feels like a giant warehouse filled with lots of amazing stuff. Objects are not presented with care (in terms of lighting, signage, and hardware) but the art was wonderful none the less. King Tut's exhibit was the exception, as his artifacts were beautifully displayed.



Jewelry from the tomb of King Tutankhamun



Friday, 15 November 2002



On top of Mt. Sinai

FROM THE MOUNTAINS OF SINAI  
TO THE RED SEA COAST •

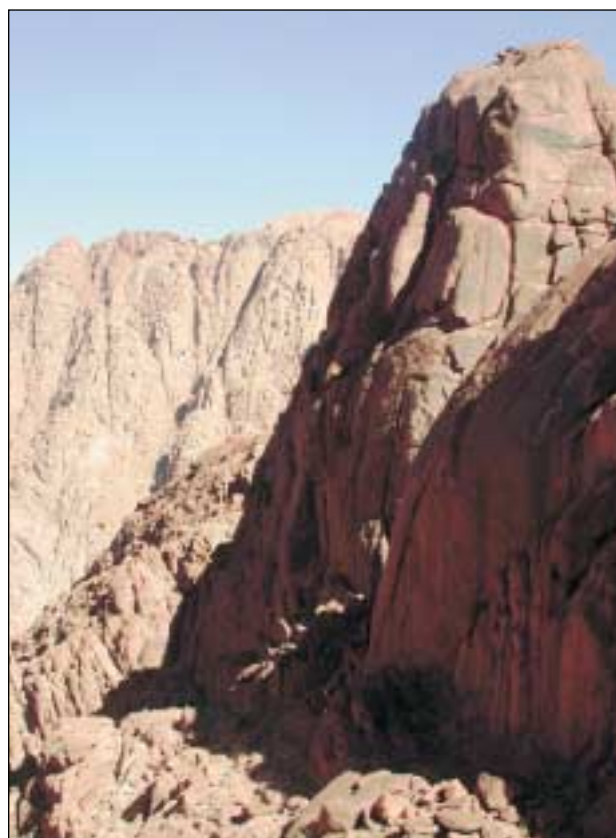
Wow, what a day. I am completely wiped out. Thank God we get to chill out for a day. We're staying at a resort in Nuweiba on the coast of the Red Sea. After the intense week that we've had, I don't think our group is capable of any serious activity at the moment. I can barely keep my eyes open and keep my pen moving, but I want to get some thoughts down on paper about our day on Mt. Sinai.

For many reasons, the climb up Mt. Sinai was one of the most memorable experiences I've ever had. The hike itself was tough, especially since I've been under the weather. We ascended via the "camel path". It was a constant, grinding incline that never let up. It was reasonably wide and smooth but a major challenge for my cardio-vascular system. No single part of the climb was impossible but overall, it was relentless, like 2 1/2 hours on a stairmaster at the most difficult setting. Then, when we got to the final part of the ascent, we were treated to a steep climb up rocks that were loosely formed into steps.

This was actually the easier way up the mountain compared to the other route – Moses' "Steps of Redemption" – which consists of 3,700 rock steps built by the monks of St. Catherine's Monastery at the base of the mountain. The monastery was built in 527 AD on the site where tradition states that Moses saw the burning bush. Evidently, the monks prefer to use the steps when ascending the mountain. I'm guessing that they must want to experience as much pain as possible while climbing so that they can bond more closely with the God of Throbbing Hamstrings!

Once on top, we went through the usual rituals – congratulations, photos, chit chat, gawking at the amazing view, etc. Then, at my suggestion, we spent fifteen minutes or so in total silence. It transformed the experience. Suddenly, we could listen to what the stone and the wind had to say.

The mountain had much to tell us. First, I was struck by how remote, rugged, and desolate it was. It's spectacular but extremely isolated. Imagine how Moses must have felt 3,200 years ago. There is something eternal and timeless about this place and this moment. It occurred to me how this landscape is virtually



unchanged since the time of Moses in 1200 BC. There is some erosion here and there, but for as far as the eye can see and as far as the ear can hear, there is no sign of civilization from the summit. Nothing modern to get in the way and complicate things.



St. Catherine's Monastery

Then I noticed how the rocks in particular and the mountains in general were smooth and rounded, reminding me of how God is using this trip to smooth out some of my rough edges.

And finally, I was struck by the feeling that, regardless of where I am or how remote it might be, God is always with me, always within me. Even here, at the edge of the world. I feel a tangible Oneness of all that is and all that ever was.

### Saturday, 16 November 2002

FROM THE RED SEA COAST TO PETRA, JORDAN • Did I mention that we could see Saudi Arabia across the Red Sea from our beachfront hotel? No? Well, we could see Saudi Arabia across the Red Sea from our beachfront hotel. When was the last time you were able to point at mountains in the distance and say "That's Saudi Arabia"? Like, never? I thought so.



The beach at Nuweiba, Egypt

Our 20 hour chillfest on the Red Sea was over much too fast. By mid day we had to board the ferry that would whisk us off to Jordan. At least I thought that we'd be whisked. Surprise: there was no whisking. Only a long, hot, slow, tortured journey by water. We had no idea that we were in for The Ferry Ride From Hell.

### Attack Of The Italian Blue Hairs

It was a bright, sunny November day. Not a cloud in the blue Egyptian sky. We arrived at the dock in Nuweiba fully anticipating a relaxing boat ride to Aqaba, Jordan. The large cabin was uncrowded and calm. I found a nice seat in an empty corner of the boat, away from the others. Time to catch some ZZZ's.

Then they came. Four buses full. Wave after wave. They came and they came and they came, armed with boxed lunches that they carried like weapons. The Italian Blue Hairs were here. They poured out of their buses and invaded our boat with conviction, purpose, and attitude. There were hundreds and hundreds of them, or was it thousands? They were like a hive of hornets swarming throughout the cabin, all in search of the perfect seat. One of them found the seat next to me to her liking. She sat down, lunch on lap, and blocked my access to the aisle. I was trapped.

The cabin was buzzing with the sound of incessant chit chat. Like a dentist's drill, the buzzing droned on and on. Then, halfway through this Three Hour Tour, the air conditioning stopped. As air circulation decreased, our anxiety level increased. Neal, my friend in an adjoining row, was the first to crack. He stumbled from his seat and lurched down the aisle in search of someone, ANYONE, who could restore the air of sanity to this god-forsaken boat ride.

But there was to be no relief. For even when we finally reached port, the crew decreed that ALL the Blue Hairs be allowed to get off the boat before ANYONE else could leave. So we waited. And waited. And waited. It was cruel. It was inhuman. It was The Ferry Ride From Hell.

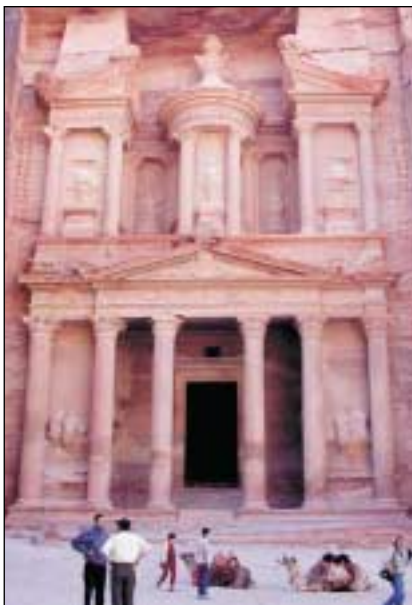


The Red Sea at sunset

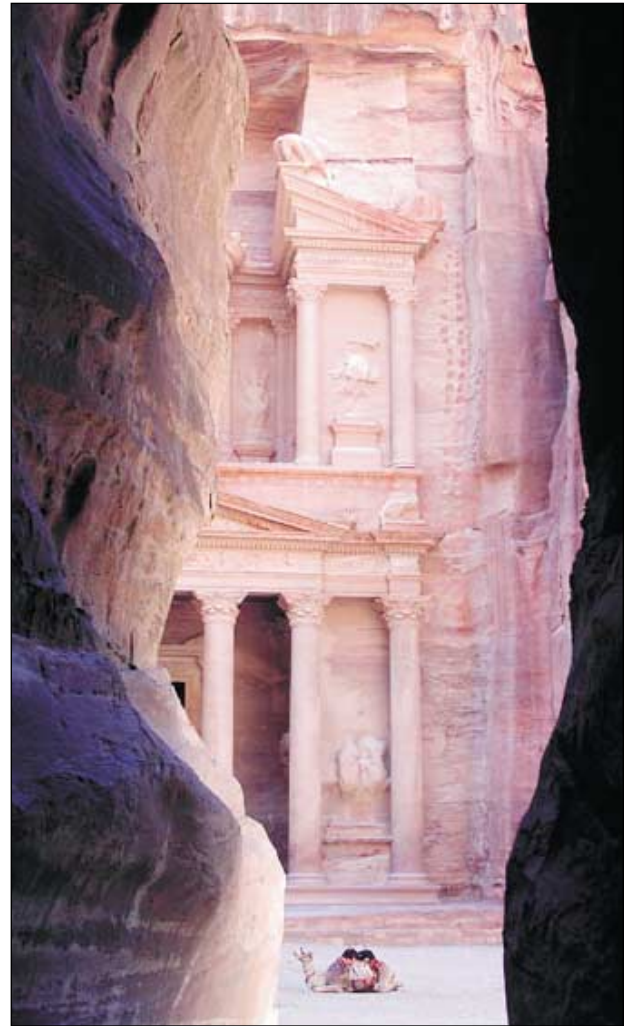


Sunday, 17 November 2002

PETRA, JORDAN • This city, which thrived over 2,000 years ago due to its strategic location on many important trade routes, is known for the amazingly intricate “buildings” that were carved out of the canyon’s rock walls. Opinions are divided as to the function of these ancient buildings – were they temples, tombs, or dwellings? No one knows for sure. All I know is that



I’ve never seen anything like it. The facades (designed in the Greco-Roman style by the Nabataeans) are so incredibly detailed that, just like the pyramids, they beg the question “How in the hell did they *do* that over 2,000 years ago?”



The “Treasury” as seen through an opening of the Siq



The Royal Tombs? or temples? or dwellings? No one knows for sure



In addition to the famous rock-cut buildings, there are Roman ruins as well, including the remains of a temple, a church, and a 7,000 seat outdoor theater.



### ***The Relentless Jordanian Souvenir Guys***

Just like in Egypt, the souvenir guys at Petra were extremely aggressive and persistent. Normally this place is crawling with visitors, but once again, due to plummeting tourism (thanks to 9/11 and the latest *Intifada*), we almost had the place to ourselves. Lucky us! We got *extra* special attention from the relentless Jordanian souvenir guys.



Hamzeh, our guide in Jordan, is not as competent as Osama. He keeps “encouraging” us to shop and eat with certain vendors, which can be really annoying. Evidently, it’s common practice for guides to get a percentage of the money spent by their group with



certain vendors – vendors with whom they have a previous agreement. Peter has tried to make it clear to our guides that this practice is not appropriate for our group. Still, I often feel that they just can’t help but see us as Walking Wallets.



View of the Dead Sea and the Jordan River Valley from Mt. Nebo in Jordan

and diarrhea come and go, I've had a head cold, and my hamstrings are still killing me from the hike up and down Mt. Sinai. I haven't been sick in two years, but boy am I getting whacked on this trip. Luckily, it's not holding me back. Once or twice I've laid low in the evening when others have gone out, but otherwise I'm not missing out on any of the important activities. But I really miss my good health.

### *The Desert Highway to the Jordan River*

Today, we left Petra and drove north up the King's Highway (which follows an ancient trade route) and the modern Desert Highway. We then drove to the top of Mt. Nebo, where Moses is said to have finally seen "The Promised Land" before he died.



View of "No Man's Land" between Jordan and the West Bank/Israel

### Monday, 18 November 2002

FROM JORDAN TO BETHLEHEM • *Don't drink the water!* Western visitors are given this warning in Egypt, and it's best to be cautious in Jordan as well. We go through bottled water like crazy, not just for drinking but also for brushing our teeth. When showering, one also needs to be careful that one doesn't accidentally swallow any water. I think that I may have ingested some in this way, because my gastro-intestinal system has been rebelling for a week. In fact, my health has not been good. Headaches

Late in the afternoon, we headed west and crossed from Jordan to the West Bank at the Allenby Bridge. The process was a cumbersome, tedious affair, essentially the equivalent of traveling through two airports (Jordan and Israel) while traveling by bus instead of by air. It necessitated traversing the "No Man's Land" between Jordan and the West Bank. This bizarre moonscape-like terrain (just north of the Dead Sea) is a harsh, lifeless, inhospitable environment that seems symbolically appropriate as a gateway to the troubled region that we are entering.

We then drove past Jericho and into the hills. The sun was setting as we entered Jerusalem for the first time. In order to make our way, we frequently had to stop and pass through checkpoints operated by the Israeli army, including the major one that blocks entry into our next destination – the town of Bethlehem in the West Bank, just south of Jerusalem.

### *O Belittled Town of Bethlehem*

As the wind whistles through the silent, forlorn buildings of Bethlehem, I begin to learn about this volatile corner of the planet.

We are staying in Bethlehem for four nights with our hosts, Josef and Yvonne, at the Alexander Hotel. A sadness permeates this town. It is normally a thriving tourist destination, but tourism is one of the first casualties of the Israeli occupation and Palestinian unrest. Perfectly nice shops, restaurants, and hotels sit empty and unused, starving for attention. Josef says they have less than 1% of the tourism that they had two years ago.



**Josef and Yvonne, our hosts in Bethlehem**

Josef is a warm, wonderful, generous man. He and his wife are Palestinian Christians. In my ignorance, I had no idea that there was such a thing. Not that it matters... Christian or Muslim, Peter says that all Palestinians are denied basic civil rights by the Israeli government and the occupying army.

### *The Conflict Junkie*

Also staying at the Alexander Hotel is a 22-year-old American. He said that he is working as a "liaison" between the Palestinians and the world press. His stories are fascinating, disturbing and depressing. He talks of getting tear gassed in Ramallah. He talks of meeting the Palestinian authorities and trying to convince them to stop using violent means. He talks of coaching the Palestinians to talk with the press in

Already, the town knows that we are here, our small group of ten Americans and one Philippino. We give the town some small measure of hope. Perhaps there will be visitors once again. Perhaps they will have the opportunity to make a living and feed their families once more.



**A street in Bethlehem**

him. Most of what he he told me was probably a lie, or at least a gross exaggeration. This kid is a Conflict Junkie. He gets off on the energy and insanity of the place. He is the first, but certainly not the last strange bird that I'll meet in this place.

### **Tuesday, 19 November 2002**

BETHLEHEM • My head is spinning. I had no idea what it was really like here in the West Bank and Israel. There is so much difficult and challenging information to absorb. How do I make sense of it all? Is there any sense to be made?

### *Sunday School Myopia*

For the first 41 years of my life, I've constructed a Jerusalem/Bethlehem/Israel in my mind that's based upon Methodist Sunday school, American news reports, magazines, books, TV snippets, school history lessons, and hearsay. Now that I'm really here, I am creating my own perceptions and reality.



**Arriving at the Alexander Hotel in Bethlehem**

a more effective, polished way. I am amazed that this kid puts himself in harms way and is striving to make a difference.

The next day, I learn from Josef that this young man has delusions of grandeur and is full of shit. He has tried to contact the Palestinians and they want nothing to do with



**The Church of the Nativity in Manger Square, Bethlehem**

No longer are these issues abstract and distant news reports. Now they are real people struggling to live their lives under difficult circumstances.

This conflict has been going on for over 50 years – so long that many of us in America and the rest of the world have become numb to it. We cease to listen. We cease to care. I know that I've been guilty of that.

### ***Away in Manger Square***

Bethlehem is a city of about 100,000 Palestinian people perched on a hill about three miles south of Jerusalem. It is considered to be the birthplace of Jesus. Manger Square is the town center and the Church of the Nativity is its focal point.

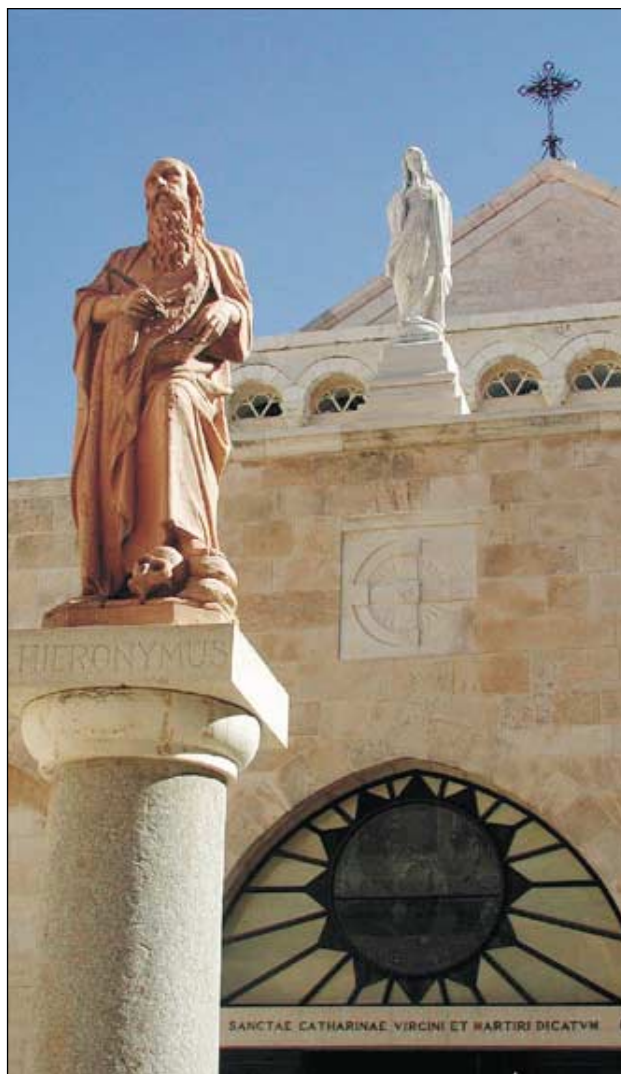
This church is built upon the place where the Bible states Jesus was born. Tradition places the site in a cave, or "grotto", which is one floor below the church's altar. A silver star on the floor marks the spot. Normally, the church and grotto would be swamped with tourists ("like Disneyland", Peter says), requiring at least an hour's wait to reach the grotto. We walked right in and had it all to ourselves.



**Manger Square, Bethlehem**



**The Grotto within the Church of the Nativity, which marks the spot where Christ is said to have been born**



The courtyard within the Church of the Nativity

### What Are The Odds?

As we travel through the Holy Land, we are visiting places that claim connections that range from the profound (“Jesus was born here” or “This is the spot where Moses received the Ten Commandments”) to the mundane (“Moses stopped at this very well for a drink of water.”) While I don’t want to live my life as a cynic, I also know it’s not wise to turn off my brain and believe everything that’s presented to me. Let’s face it – for both economic and sacred reasons, many of these places have a lot invested in perpetuating the belief that something important happened there. It’s important to be a discriminating consumer of information.

In this regard, we are lucky to have Peter Miano as our group leader. He has broad expertise and vast



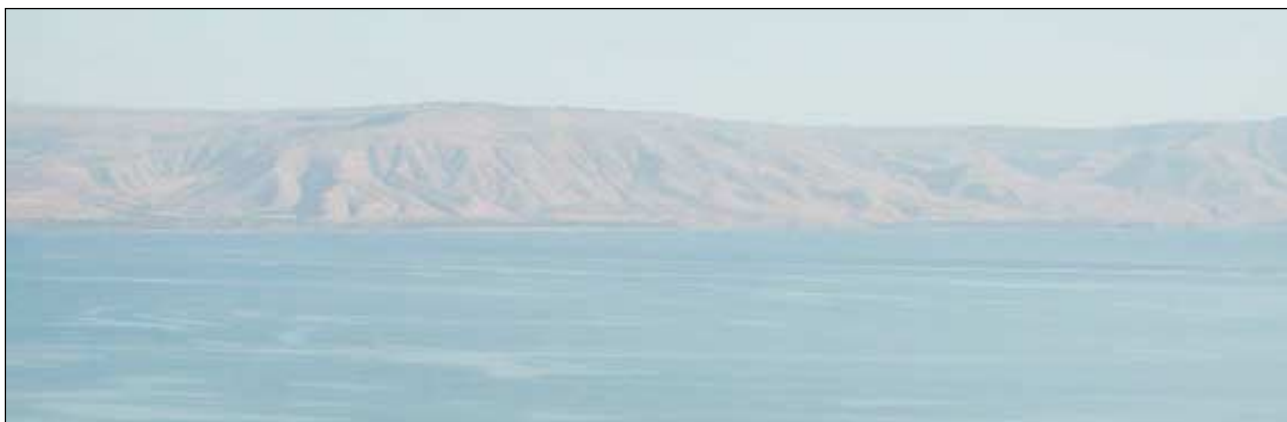
Peter Miano, our group leader and Executive Director of The Society for Biblical Studies

experience in this region, especially in areas of history, archaeology, and biblical studies. Hence, he is able to offer very informed opinions on the likelihood that a site is authentic.

For example, some scholars suggest that the likely birthplace of Jesus of Nazareth would have been Nazareth. However, the tradition that Jesus was born in Bethlehem is rooted in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke and is a tradition uncontested until the 20th century. The oldest witness outside the Bible is St. Justin the Martyr in 160 AD. A church was later built on the traditional site around 330 AD. So as early as 127 years after the death of Christ, it was the acknowledged site. Hence, one might say that there

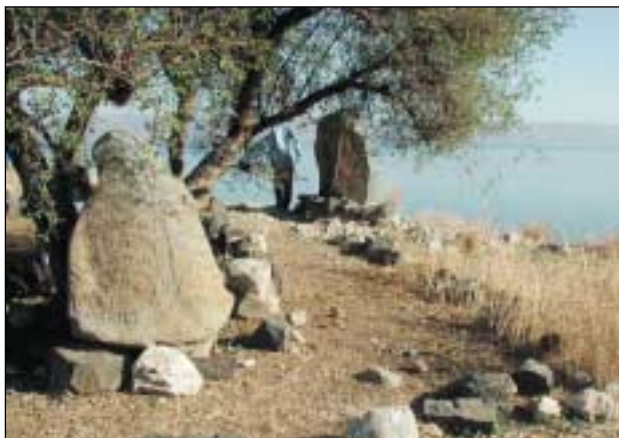


is a really good chance that it happened in Bethlehem. What I came to realize for myself is that, in this case, knowing with certainty is not crucial. People have been coming to this place for over 1,800 years to honor the birth of Jesus. That, in and of itself, is significant to me.



The Sea of Galilee, looking across to the Golan Heights and, beyond, Syria

There are other places in the Holy Land where we can say with more certainty that Jesus lived and worked in that region. In spite of the frequent ambiguity around the details, this experience has made Jesus much more real and relevant to me.



Mount of the Beatitudes on the Sea of Galilee, the traditional site of Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount"

### Wednesday, 20 November 2002

SEA OF GALILEE • Today we drove two hours north to the Sea of Galilee. It's not really a "sea" – it's actually a very big lake. But it's quite beautiful and, obviously, extremely rich in history.

This is the land where Jesus was raised and did most of his teaching. It is where he rounded up a significant number of his Disciples, including Simon Peter, to make them "fishers of men". It is where he performed many of his miracles, including walking on water and the multiplication of the loaves and fishes (where he fed thousands of his followers with five loaves of bread and two fish.) And it is also where he preached the "Sermon on the Mount", which began with the Beatitudes (e.g. "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.")

### Way Down Upon The Jordan River

What happens when you cross Disneyland with the Holy Land and combine it with the desire to be baptized in the Jordan River? You get the strange place pictured below.

No one really knows exactly *where* on the Jordan River Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist. The most likely site is within a military zone that currently has restricted access. In other places, due to the limited flow of water upriver, the Jordan is nothing more than a large ditch. But since no pilgrimage would be complete without a proper dousing in the Jordan River, a local kibbutz thought it prudent and profitable to create a place where this could happen efficiently.

So, several years ago, they created a tourist complex, complete with a huge gift shop, several outdoor theaters with seating for hundreds, and queue lines that slowly wind their way into the water. Its completion coincided with the beginning of the latest *Intifada*. Hence, the anticipated hordes have stayed away. During our brief visit, the waters were quiet and still while the porcelain Jesus dinner plates (suitable for collecting) gathered dust in the gift shop.



No, this is *not* Sea World or Disneyland - it's the queue lines and outdoor theater of a Jordan River baptismal site



A hand-painted Greek "icon" of the Mother and Child

### *Johnny's Flat in Bethlehem*

Tonight, after dinner, most of us went next door to Johnny's Souvenir Shop. The store is owned by Johnny, Josef's brother. Their two families are very close. It's a *much* more relaxed shopping environment than anyplace else I've experienced on this trip. He has some really nice merchandise that I actually *want* to buy. There's no pressure either. I've become enamored with the exquisitely painted "icons" from Greece. Icons are paintings (on olive wood) of sacred subject matter, such as Jesus or the Mother and Child. I just might have to splurge and buy one.

My companions and I then decided to enjoy the night air, hang out on the street, and smoke the Cuban cigars that we bought the previous day. Johnny saw us and invited us up to the roof to finish our cigars and enjoy the view of Bethlehem under the stars. Because the town is built upon several steep hills (picture San Francisco), the view is beautiful as you face downhill toward Jerusalem.

We finished our cigars and talked politics. I am amazed that Johnny and Josef are able to remain optimistic in the midst of this violence, chaos, and uncertainty. "In four months, it will be better," Johnny said. "After elections, it will be better," added Josef. "Both sides have to wear themselves out, then it will be better."

Johnny then invited us down to his flat – a wealthy home by West Bank standards. It was filled with expensive furniture and various knick-knacks. Clearly, when times were good, Johnny did very well. He told stories of rich Russians who would come to the store and drop \$20,000, \$40,000, even \$60,000 cash on diamonds, jewelry, and other merchandise. It was likely a convenient way to launder Russian black market money, but Johnny asks no questions. He is a businessman, not a politician.



Johnny's Souvenir Shop and The Alexander Hotel (above); Johnny (left)

His wife was ironing clothes when we arrived at their flat. She has a tired face. The years of constant stress, pain, and frustration are visible in every wrinkle. The Palestinians that I've met in Bethlehem tend to look older than they really are. They seem to age quickly. She stopped ironing long enough to bring a tray of coffee and cookies. She is originally from Cypress, so the home and furnishings reflect a "Greece meets Middle East" style with lots of shiny gold trim, tassels, and rich fabrics.

### *The Desperate Need For Hope*

Is there a solution? Can peace really exist here? Or is it fatally, fundamentally, and infuriatingly flawed? I'd hate to think that any circumstance is beyond hope. Many Palestinian and Jewish moderates desperately want peace and cling to the hope that it can be achieved. As one Jewish peace-maker told us, "This is *not* a battle between Jews and Palestinians. It's a battle between Jews and Palestinians who want peace and Jews and Palestinians who want conflict and war."

I've noticed that, with some people, it can be tricky and frustrating to have a constructive dialogue about the policies of the Israeli government. Any criticism of their policies or actions can immediately garner the label "anti Semitic". Huh? Why would a dialogue about government policies be considered racist? If I criticize my government or President Bush, does that make me "anti Caucasian" or "anti Christian"? No. But in Israel, race and religion become intertwined with politics and policy in a confusing way.

The Palestinians that I've met on this trip seem normal to me. Josef and Yvonne remind me of my parents. They just want the opportunity to work hard, earn a

living, run their businesses, feed their families, send their kids to school, take an occasional vacation, and have the basic human rights that so many Americans take for granted.

But I'm not naive enough to think that I'm seeing a representative cross section of all Palestinians. We haven't gone to any refugee camps or any of the towns, like Gaza or Hebron, where conditions are

much worse than they are here in Bethlehem. In general, the Israeli government doesn't want to call too much attention to Bethlehem because of the deep feelings that Western Christians have towards it. It reflects poorly on Israel and creates outrage in the west when ABC News shows Israeli tanks in Manger Square.

The Israeli army in Hebron or Ramallah doesn't evoke the same reaction, however. In those regions, Palestinians are losing hope, or have already lost it. It occurs to me that the loss of hope is incredibly dangerous. Without hope, people cease to care about consequences or their own well being. Without hope, fertile ground is tragically created for difficult acts like suicide bombings and other forms of terrorism.



**These neon Christmas candles on a streetlight in Bethlehem have seen better days**

### *A Theology Encased in Armor*

There are passionate extremists on both sides who vehemently and unapologetically insist that compromise is unacceptable.

We met one such man, Professor Hagi, a Jewish educator at various religious schools in Jerusalem. Hagi is a strict Zionist who has complete conviction that the Jews have the biblical mandate, a "divine order" from the Book of Joshua, to "take this land", at all costs,

“whether we want to or not”. He said that this “order from God” supercedes all other biblical teachings, including the Ten Commandments.

“This is the land of God and belongs to the children of God,” he said. “It is the mission of Israel to fulfill God’s promise – the return of the Jews to the Promised Land. This miracle will change the world towards more faith in God and the acceptance of a Biblical morality.”

“According to Jewish Law,” he added, “Jewish sovereignty must prevail or it is a betrayal of the Bible. This will be our land. There is no other way.”

When asked about the fate of over 3.5 million Palestinians who live here, he said that they have three choices:

1. They can stay and live under the sovereignty of Israel
2. They can leave
3. They can fight and Israel will be “tough” with them

His theology was encased in armor, with no openness or room for discussion. He was not able or willing to be self critical or self aware. And I could glean no love or compassion in his words or tone.

The Palestinians were, of course, living in this land prior to 1948 when Israel was established. Regardless, I do not wish to argue history. I am not a historian.



**Damascus Gate, one of seven gated entrances into the Old City of Jerusalem**



**The Old City of Jerusalem, including the Temple Mount (left) and Dome of the Rock (the gold dome on right) as seen from the Mount of Olives in East Jerusalem**

But the acceptance of a Jewish state no longer seems to be the issue. I believe that most Palestinians are ready to co-exist with Jews. What they want are basic human rights. They are trapped in a cage that expands or contracts at the whim of the Israeli government and its army. The cage may grow and occasionally allow them to leave their town, or it may shrink and restrict them, 24 / 7, to their homes for days at a time. When Palestinians are under curfew or “lock down”, as it is called, they can’t go to work, they can’t open their businesses, they can’t shop for groceries, they can’t visit friends, and their kids can’t go to school. Then, every 3-5 days, they might be allowed to leave their homes for a few hours.

A few weeks ago on the phone, Peter called the situation in the West Bank “apartheid”. Those are strong words. I was shocked that he would insinuate such a thing. In the 1980s, the world was outraged with South Africa and enacted world-wide boycotts to affect change. It couldn’t be that bad in the Holy Land, could it? If it was, wouldn’t the world be doing more about it?

Now that I’m here, it’s hard to deny what I see. I’m no expert, but it sure looks like apartheid to me.

#### **Thursday, 21 November 2002**

JERUSALEM • Today we took a fascinating walk through the part of Jerusalem called the Old City, whose history dates back over 6,000 years. It is completely encircled by walls, which requires passing through one of seven gates to get inside.

We started our morning on the Mount of Olives, a hill directly east of the Old City that has great importance to Christians. Many of the events from Jesus’ final days took place here, including the betrayal in the Garden of Gethsemane.



### *These Crowded Streets*

The streets of the Old City were bustling and crowded – and I use the term “streets” loosely. By western standards, they are big alleyways used exclusively for foot traffic. Cars are very rare in the Old City since Jerusalem developed and matured centuries before the automobile existed. With rare exception, they thankfully haven’t done a 20th Century modernization to make car usage possible. Instead, it’s a fabulous experience on foot, just like it has been for thousands of years.



**2,000 year-old Olive trees in the Garden of Gethsemane**



**The streets of the Muslim Quarter in the Old City, Jerusalem**

The city is a wonderfully complex mix of architectural and cultural influences from dozens of different eras. At times, we stepped on the actual stones from the time of King Herod and Jesus. We also walked by Byzantine walls, through arches from the Middle Ages, and next to buildings from the times of the Crusades and the Ottoman Empire.

A stroll through the Old City was a feast for the senses. The colors, the sounds, the smells, the textures... it was overwhelming in a rich and wonderful way. Along both sides of the streets were a plethora of vendors, tucked into every nook and cranny, selling everything from large canvas bags of fragrant spices, to hanging slabs of meat to all kinds of fresh produce, to beautifully embroidered Arab dresses, to piles of skinned sheep’s heads with eyeballs! There were also plenty modern goods like Nikes, electronics, and polar fleece jackets along with an abundance of souvenirs – there are *always* souvenirs *everywhere*.



The Western Wall; Christ's Tomb in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre; the Dome of the Rock

Jerusalem's Old City is currently divided into: The Muslim Quarter, Christian Quarter, Jewish Quarter, and Armenian Quarter. This unique city feels divided and polarized. Three of the world's major religions (Christianity, Islam, and Judaism) all consider Jerusalem to be a sacred and important place.

The focal point of the Jewish Quarter is the Western Wall, Judaism's holiest site. This wall is part of the retaining wall from the Second Temple, rebuilt by Herod the Great over 2,000 years ago. It has been the Jews' chief place of pilgrimage for centuries – the place they come to lament the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 AD. Pilgrims traditionally leave written prayers tucked into the cracks between the stones of the old wall.

In the Christian Quarter is the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Christianity's most holy site. Like the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, it was built around 330 AD. Until the late 19th century,

it was the uncontested site of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. It was built over the Rock of Golgotha, both the spot where Jesus was believed to have been crucified and the site of his burial before resurrection.

We didn't get to visit the "Dome of the Rock" because it is now open only to Muslims. This has been the case for over two years, ever since Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon made his controversial walk (accompanied by 3,000 Israeli soldiers) to the Temple Mount. To Muslims, nothing could have been more provocative. They were enraged because it expressed extreme disrespect for one of their holiest sites. The Palestinian response was immediate and led to the latest period of conflict and violence that continues today.

### *Post-Traumatically Stressed*

Our group was joined this afternoon by Mary Lawrence, a member of the Christian peacemaking team. Mary is a Methodist minister and has been working in Hebron for the past 1 1/2 years. She is now at the tail end of a three month stint and will be heading back to her home in Lunenburg, MA in a few weeks. She is a kind-hearted woman in her early 60s, about 5'3" with thick, curly gray hair and glasses.

Hebron has been a brutal place to live and work, she said, especially after last week's incident in which Palestinian militants ambushed armed Israeli soldiers. Israel's response was swift and violent.

I sat on the bus with Mary and listened to her stories. I felt concern for her. She seems to be suffering from what I would call Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome. She has a nervous manner, her speech is fast and mumbled, and she rarely pauses for a breath. She also frequently repeats herself. Her visa requires her to periodically leave the country. Eventually, she can get another visa and come back. These trips home help preserve one's sanity and keep one from becoming completely immersed in the chaos, sadness, and violence of the region.

### *Dawn's Early Blight*

On our way into the Old City this morning, we learned that there had been a suicide bombing at dawn in West Jerusalem. Details are sketchy, but it's clear that many innocent people died. Since West Jerusalem is several miles from the Old City, it didn't directly affect our day or our ability to go to the places on our itinerary. It was in the back of my mind all day, however. While we weren't visiting any "hot spots" that might be targeted by bombers, it still created a heightened sense of vigilance and concern.

By mid afternoon, news leaked out that the bomber is thought to have ties to Bethlehem. It is not clear if he lived there or just had family there, but as we



**Bethlehem as ghost town during the lock down**

approached the Bethlehem checkpoint around 4pm, it was obvious that the energy had shifted with the Israeli soldiers at the "border". They were much more strict and uptight – refusing to allow our bus to enter Bethlehem. Evidently, they are concerned that if a bus goes into the West Bank, it might come out with hidden bombs bound for West Jerusalem. So Josef had to send vans to the checkpoint to pick us up and drive us back to the hotel.

What next? As sure as the sun will rise, there will be a response by the Israeli army in Bethlehem to this morning's bombing. No aggressive act seems to go unpunished by either side. To what degree they respond is the only question. Will there be tanks or troops? Will they go door-to-door? While I don't feel that we're in overt danger – the Israelis aren't anxious to have something bad happen to American tourists – it will be difficult to sleep soundly tonight. If serious action were imminent, however, I'm guessing the Israeli army wouldn't be letting us back into Bethlehem at all. Still, I'm wondering if we should move to a different hotel in Jerusalem just to be safe. Peter doesn't seem to be inclined to uproot the group from our final night at the Alexander in Bethlehem.



**The view at 7:00am from my hotel window of an Israeli jeep and armored personnel carrier moving through Bethlehem**

### 7:00am, Friday, 22 November 2002

BETHLEHEM • I awoke this morning to a very odd sound – the sound of an Israeli jeep and a tank-like armored personnel carrier rumbling up the street behind our hotel. I opened the drapes in my room and took the photo below. They've come, no doubt, to enact some sort of retribution for yesterday's suicide bombing. The streets are otherwise totally deserted. That's weird. There must be some sort of curfew in place, because the town should be bustling with people and traffic at this hour of the morning.

It's going to be interesting to see if this affects our ability to get out of Bethlehem. We are scheduled to leave Israel today and make our way to Amman so that we can fly back to America tomorrow.

### 8:30am

BETHLEHEM • We're now officially under "lock down", which means we cannot leave the hotel and walk or drive on the streets of Bethlehem. Outside, it looks like a ghost town – no cars, no people, no noise. Peter is working the phones, talking to the army and the government to get permission for us to leave. Our bus will certainly not be allowed to come to our hotel. We will once again take cars and vans to the checkpoint, where we will eventually meet our bus on the "other side". Peter is giving them the license plate numbers of our vehicles so that all parties know that we have "permission" to be on the streets.

An Israeli jeep continues to make his rounds, ensuring that no one is outside. So far, Peter says that this has been a fairly minor show of force.

I saw a car speed by with a man and woman inside. Josef says that she's pregnant and is going to the hospital – but even a pregnant couple must first get permission from the army to be on the street during lock down.

### 12noon

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JERUSALEM • We finally made it out of Bethlehem around 11am. I felt like a refugee, leaving town under lock-down and crossing the checkpoint on foot – with all of my belongings on my back or in tow. This was, of course, minor compared to what the Palestinians in the West Bank (or the Jews in West Jerusalem) have to endure every day of their lives. But I was definitely out of my comfort zone.

Israeli soldiers carefully examined the contents of our bags, as if we were going through customs at the

airport. During this entire trip, I've never felt unsafe at the hands of any Arabs I've met, but I did feel a little queasy today at the hands of an 18-year-old Israeli soldier armed with an M-16 and an attitude.

Regardless, it felt weird that we were allowed to leave, with our American passport as our ticket, but many others cannot – all because of where we were born. The Palestinians are trapped in a cage that is expanded or contracted at the whims of the Israeli government and its army. The cage may be their "area" (A, B, or C), their town, or their home. The cage grows and shrinks, but it is always there.

But, to paraphrase an old saying, the caged bird must sing. It looks for hope. It looks for ways to make do, to survive, and to fight, if necessary. As long as it doesn't give up, there is hope.

Once it gives up, it will surely die.



Crossing the Israeli army's checkpoint at Bethlehem on foot with luggage in tow

### *Feeling Gravity's Pull*

Peter mentioned that Yvonne's 23 year old brother, Jerius, has gone into hiding today. We met him a few days ago and he told us his story. He was one of the Palestinian men holed up inside the Church of the Nativity last spring while the church was surrounded by the Israeli army. It was a stand off for 39 days until international mediators were able to draft an agreement that forced 13 Palestinians to be exiled to Europe while the rest of the group (124 in all, including Jerius) were allowed to go free. The Israeli army seems to have a long memory, though, as Jerius is in danger every time there is a lockdown.

Jerius told us that some day, when there is peace, he would like to be a tour guide. He strikes me as a normal guy, not prone to being either a radical or a doormat. He has a wife and a child. He's an average guy who, because of the extraordinary circumstances of his life, has been pulled in a difficult direction. He owns a gun. He joined a local Palestinian organization that, while not as radical as Hamas or Hizballah, is active enough to get the attention of the Israeli authorities and earn him a place on one of their lists. And now, gravity pulls him deeper into the muck.

We also learned this morning that, on the other side of Bethlehem, the Israeli army moved in with force and blew up the family home of the Palestinian whom they suspect of being yesterday's suicide bomber. Blew it right up. This is a frequent tactic. No questions asked. No due process. What they value most is sending a message and exacting immediate revenge for the latest bombing. Sending a message and exacting revenge – one could say this is a motivation shared by Palestinian suicide bombers, I suppose. Where does it start? Where does it end? The only thing that seems certain is the repetition of the same pattern that was repeated today here in Bethlehem: An eye for an eye. A bomb for a bomb.

### *The Rabbi's Apartment*

We had one final stop in Jerusalem before leaving Israel for Jordan and beyond. We met with Rabbi Jeremy Mingrom at his apartment in South Jerusalem. The place was inhabited by two yappy dogs and an amazing amount of clutter, but it was also filled with the spirit of a man who clearly has a big heart and a lot of wisdom. He is in a group called "Rabbis For Human Rights". Rabbi Mingrom sees flaws in the Zionist ideology. He said that two equal states is no longer the best solution. Instead, he says that one state with equal rights for everyone is the only way that makes sense in the long run.



Rabbi Jeremy Mingrom of "Rabbis For Peace"

11:30pm

AMMAN, JORDAN • We're safe and sound in Amman. It's a relief that Israel and the West Bank are now behind us. We can go back to our lives in America. Meanwhile, Josef, Johnny, Yvonne, Joey, and Maria sit in their homes in Bethlehem, bored out of their minds, "locked down" until they are told they can move about again – at which point they will have no customers, no income, nothing to do but wait and be hopeful for the future.

And the desperate men who tried valiantly to sell us jewelry and postcards on Manger Square have no one to whom to sell and little hope to make a life for themselves. Might one or more of them completely lose hope and become a suicide bomber one day? I pray not. Protect them all, Lord, from a future of desperation and violence.

### Saturday, 23 November 2002

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30,000 FT. OVER THE MEDITERRANEAN OCEAN • We're now safely aboard our Royal Jordanian flight, headed for America. At 12 1/2 hours, it's longer than the eastbound flight because of the head winds.

The Middle East is now behind me, though I feel its presence — the images, the conversations — still with me. It was a welcome relief spending the last 20 hours in Jordan, chilling out and decompressing after the intensity of the past five days.

Overall, it's been an amazing trip. I've lost a little innocence and left some illusions behind, but I've gained much more. I feel older now. I feel gratitude for what I have, what I feel, where I was born, and to whom I was born. I take back with me a new awareness, a new perspective, and a new sense of wisdom and focus. I feel a compassion that allows me to respect our differences, honor our uniqueness, and come together in our commonalities.

I don't know where it's going to lead, but I am excited about the prospects. I am open to the possibilities.



