



A Pilgrimage to Jerusalem

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My wife and I joined a group of fellow pilgrims on a tour of biblical places in the Holy Land in the countries of Jordan, Israel and Egypt.

Substantial parts of these countries remain barren with exposed hills of sandstones and limestone formation as well as large tracts of desert. Significant engineering efforts are being expended to provide much needed water to meet the increasing demand of the local population and tourists alike. Jordan, which produces phosphates in abundance, generally receives only 75mm of rainfall per year, and obtains its water supply from large reserves of underground water.

A large part of north-eastern Israel, near Tiberias, Capernaum and Nazareth, receives its water supply from the Sea of Galilee (it is actually a lake), which is linked to the River Jordan. The shores of the 'sea' witnessed many miracles (according to biblical records) during the time of Jesus Christ. Among the most famous is the multiplication of five loaves of bread and two fishes to feed 5,000 people, and the changing of water into wine at the wedding feast in Cana.

Located close to the Mediterranean Sea, the western part of the region experiences more favourable climatic conditions and, hence, is better able to support agricultural activities. Common fruits grown in the region include dates, figs, olives, tomatoes and watermelons.

The highlight of the trip was the visit to Jerusalem (Baitulmaqdis in Arabic), which represents a convergence of three faiths, namely, Islam, Christianity and Judaism, and yet remains a city searching for peace and a permanent settlement of many complex social, political, historical, economic and sovereignty issues in this divided region of Israel, the Occupied West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

To the Jews, this is the land of the Torah, their past glories and the hope to their future; to the Christians, this is the land where Jesus lived and suffered, preached and performed healings and miracles; to the Muslims, this is the land from where Prophet Muhammad ascended to heaven.

The striking Dome of The Rock, together with the nearby El-Aqsa Mosque which was built between 709 and 715 by Khalif Waleed, the son of Abdul-Malik who built the Dome, is considered by Muslims as the third most sacred worship place after Mecca and Medina.

Jerusalem's population of 600,000 comprises one third Arab Palestinians and two thirds Jewish. It is interesting to note that there are only 200,000 Christians out of a total population of about 7.5 million in the whole region.

The walled city, with its juxtapose of many religious structures and other exquisite buildings, is the result of centuries of hillslope engineering planning and construction, many of which were built over identified locations of religious significance.

Although we could travel safely as tourists, this part of the world remains in conflict. The land of faith and love has also been a land of war, blood and misery. I can only pray that with God's blessings, the leaders of the world, together with the Israelis and Palestinians, will eventually forge a permanent truce and peace in this Holy Land. ■

