

## **Moving Beyond the Pages of Scripture: Journeying Through the Fifth Gospel**

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In seminary, students are immersed in Scripture. The Bible is the subject of in-depth analysis using approaches like hermeneutics and exegesis. In pursuit of scholarly excellence, professors work to develop within students a deeper and more academically rigorous understanding of the Bible and its history, context, and content. Students are immersed in the grand narratives of God’s activity, from the epic journey of Abraham and Sarah and all their descendants to the life of Jesus and those who followed him. Students in supervised field education, placed in congregational settings, take their academic knowledge and put it into practice as they offer Bible studies, lead worship, and write sermons.

As a pastoral theologian and a field educator with a passion for travel, I was curious about what happens when people expand their understanding of the biblical story by moving beyond the pages of Scripture and travelling the biblical land of Israel and Palestine. What is the impact of having an embodied experience of Scripture by walking the land or sailing the seas upon which the stories unfolded? Does walking the land spark creative imagination and bridge the divide between what is found on the printed pages of the Bible and what is being lived in the land?

St Jerome (347–420 CE) said, “Five gospels recount the life of Jesus. Four are contained in scripture, the fifth is contained in the land they call Holy. Read the fifth gospel, and the world of the other four will open up to you.” How does reading the Fifth Gospel open the world of Scripture? Does it influence the way people hear the biblical stories, approach worship leadership, preach sermons, or experience personal faith? How does travel to the Holy Land help to form pastors and lay people?

Working with New Testament professor Sr Joan Campbell, we developed an academic course, *Journeying through the Fifth Gospel*, which included ten days in the Holy Land in February 2020. There were six students among the nineteen travellers, who also included clergy or religious personnel and lay people from four denominations: United Church of Canada, United Church of Christ, Roman Catholic, and Anglican.

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Each of the participants, as well as two people who had travelled to the Holy Land on a different trip, were invited to reflect on their experience and to ponder how the journey had impacted their faith as well as their approach and understanding of Scripture. Research was conducted through in-person and group interviews and written responses to a series of questions. Fourteen people participated. As well as assessing the personal and professional impact of the journey, the research was designed to help us understand more clearly the experience and make improvements in the pedagogical approach for future courses, keeping in mind the Wabash Center's practice of midrange reflection:

Midrange reflection on teaching and learning lifts out from the particularities of a concrete teaching incident, the issues, themes, questions, approaches, procedures and so forth, that have the potential, thus identified, to be of general relevance in other situations of teaching and learning, though they would need to be adapted not just adopted to other, equally particular contexts.<sup>i</sup>

The insights from this process will be beneficial in the planning of a course to Turkey and Greece titled the Footsteps of Paul and the Early Church in 2023 and a return trip to Israel and Palestine in 2024.

All the participants identified a love of travel as one of the reasons they chose to participate in the trip, but more than that, they were captivated by the idea of immersing themselves in the place where Scripture unfolded – to walk where Jesus walked, to see what Jesus saw in a way that “would bring those stories to life.” One ordained minister was motivated to travel because she had experienced the inspiring way a chaplain who had traveled to the Holy Land talked about Bible stories (“His insights were unique”). Having found the chaplain's approach enriching to her as a participant in a congregation, she said, “I wanted to go because I thought it would help my ministry in a way that I experienced it helping that chaplain in his ministry.” This was a common motivation for other clergy and students. Lay people were excited about the opportunity to travel with a group and to meet and reflect on the experience with others who shared a similar interest in Scripture as well as to learn more about the current and historical dynamics of Israel and Palestine.

All survey participants identified that the trip had met or exceeded their expectations. Nobody came home disappointed; they were unanimous in extolling the value of such a journey, and many indicated they would like to make a return visit.

Some initially struggled to articulate the impact of travelling to the Holy Land, saying, “It is hard to put into words.” However, given time and opportunity to bring back to their minds the various places and experiences, their reflections became more concrete and the impact more apparent, and suggestions for improvement arose.

This process of reflection is very similar to what good supervisor-mentors undertake with students as they unpack a pastoral experience by looking at the event from a variety of perspectives, exploring the impact, discerning underlying dynamics at

work, and assessing what changes the students might make in the future because of the experience.

History came alive as the participants had the opportunity to look at the archeological evidence of events from the past. One student was interested in Masada, an ancient fortress on a rock plateau, in the desert close to the Dead Sea. Between 37 and 31 BCE, Herod the Great built two palaces there, and many of the ruins are now visible because of extensive excavation done in the past sixty years. It is probably better known because of the mini-series of the same name that chronicles the siege by Roman troops at the end of the first Jewish Roman war in 74 CE. According to Flavius Josephus, a first-century historian, the siege ended with mass suicide. A traveller commented, "Seeing it, and the ostraca used for drawing lots, made the history real in a way that I can't find words to explain." For others, standing in front of Abraham's Gate at Tel Dan in northern Israel, which was built more than 4000 years ago, brought the words of Genesis 14:14 to life, thinking about Abraham travelling to Dan to rescue his nephew Lot. Coming from Canada, a country that, in terms of colonialism, celebrates a bit more than 400 years of history, to stand in a space with ten times that history is quite remarkable. The length, depth, and breadth of history are palpable as you explore significant places.

There is something about the theology of place, travelling the land, that grounds the biblical story in an embodied way. Seeing the excavated tells that recount the history of the past 4000 years brings to life the conquests of the past as archaeologists dig down layer after layer, each bringing a new era back to life and helping to bridge the divide between now and the experience of our scriptural ancestors. Going back to the place where it all began unleashes memories or connects us with the people of the past. As Sarah Baxter writes in her book *Spiritual Places*,

When you visit a spiritual place, you are not simply admiring a cute quirk of geology or a clever bit of architectural engineering . . . at a spiritual place you are also seeing and sensing the stories behind the rocks, bricks, mud and mortar. You are channeling the ancestors who have stood where you now stand, and the dreams and fears that they brought with them.<sup>ii</sup>

In reflection, one student made connections between her own experience of being with her children recently in their childhood neighborhood, a place they had left many years ago, and how being in that place brought back a flood of memories that "just doesn't happen if you are not on the land." She went on to say, "In the same way I realized our old home, and just being there, reminded our boys of their rootedness and groundedness in life of their formative years, this spirituality of place, place being the Holy Land, has rooted and grounded me in a way that will never be uprooted but ever growing."

There is a sense, identified by many of the participants, that coming to Israel and Palestine, even though they had never been there before, gave them a feeling of "coming home." Often this reflection came with tears and an acknowledgement of the depth of

their emotion. One lay participant said, “When I was there, it felt surreal. When I came back home, I kept feeling this tug to go back . . . I need to go back home.”

Many participants indicated the same desire to go back so that, like watching a movie for the second time, they could be more aware of the subtle details and pick up on things which may have been lost in the speed of the original trip. Having covered much of the geography of the land and the “touristy” highlights from the Dead Sea in the south to the northern part of the Galilee and the Golan Heights, being able to stay in one location and have more time for reflection and cultural immersion was identified as desirable for a future trip. As one participant said, “I’d like to return to Jerusalem for two weeks and rent a room overlooking the market and write.” On an initial trip to Israel and Palestine, there is a sense of urgency to travel as much of the land as possible and to see as many of the significant places as can be scheduled. The speed of the trip does not leave a great deal of time for processing the experience, but as an initial or maybe the only trip that many people will be able to do, this pace seems necessary.

Participants were asked, after hearing the quote from St Jerome about the Fifth Gospel, to describe the effect that travelling the land they call Holy has made in their experience of Scripture. All participants identified a deepening of their experience of the written word. “I cannot read the scriptures in the same way. I cannot read them without now understanding where they happened and reimagining my time in that place. The land, the geography, the different climates, the distance from one place to another.”

Another participant, in thinking about distances, made a concrete connection to the story of the Good Samaritan and how that parable unfolded on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. Being on that road and seeing the landscape, she said, “opened up that whole story for me.” Another student said, I didn’t expect the impact that the land itself would have in my understanding of scripture. Being able to touch the olive trees and flowers in the valley where (tradition says!) David slew Goliath, seeing the herd of sheep and goats with the Bedouin shepherds outside of Jericho, the desolation along the shores of the Dead Sea, the fertile lands around the Sea of Galilee, the waterfall and spring at Ein Gedi, the surreal colours of the sunset at we headed down to the Dead Sea, the unforgiving landscape at Anti-Machaerus and Masada – all of those created, for me, a deep recognition, appreciation and ‘lived reality’ when I read scripture now. I don’t have to simply imagine the backdrop to the stories, I’ve seen and felt it.

“Tradition says . . .” was a common refrain from our guide. There are many places that have little if any archeological evidence to definitively identify a geographical spot as being the spot where an event took place. The “Upper Room” in Jerusalem is certainly not the actual upper room in which Jesus celebrated the Passover with his disciples; the building is only a few hundred years old. However, there is no doubt that the event happened somewhere close by. Likewise, a shop sign in Jaffa that says “Home of Simon the Tanner” is more reflective of tradition than empirical evidence. For most participants, archaeological evidence was not always required to make something feel real or to

generate a sense of deep closeness to the biblical text. "Tradition says . . ." is based on a long-standing oral tradition that was then recorded in ancient texts. Emperor Constantine's mother Helena visited Jerusalem just a few hundred years after the death of Jesus (326–328 CE) and, according to Eusebius of Caesarea, a Greek historian and bishop of Caesarea Maritima who recorded the details of her pilgrimage, she was responsible for having both the Church of the Nativity, the place of Jesus' birth, and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the place of his death and resurrection, built. The archeological evidence may be scant, but tradition says these are the places where these events took place, and that tradition is long-standing and has within it an air of authority. Interestingly, among the participants, geographical locations generated deeper feelings and connection to Scripture than buildings. Although many were glad to see the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and the Church of the Nativity, the sheer volume of other tourists and the speed ("Blink and you miss it") took away from the experience. There was, for many, no time to truly absorb the holiness and significance of the location. "Bethlehem was not a holy experience at all which was very disappointing to me." One lucky traveller, on a different trip, had a different experience, having time free of fighting the crowds and being able to go twice down those smooth stones in the Church of the Nativity to the manger area and sit and reflect. She said, "We were actually able to be in those spaces." The opportunity "to be" in a space or with the land or the sea was very significant in people's experience.

Having more time to process and reflect on individual experiences is critical and may be why walking was identified as significant, whether that was on the Road to Damascus, along the Sea of Galilee, or down the hill in Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives to the Garden of Gethsemane. Walking slowed people down and helped the participants embody the experience. The feelings which emerged on those walks were often quite intense. Instead of taking a taxi all the way to the top of Mount Tabor, our guide insisted that we walk the final part of the ascent. One student, who identified Mount Tabor as the most emotional place of the journey due to just imagining Moses and Elijah, said, "Maybe the walk was part of it, it felt like a journey and we got to the top and I was broken open by it, it was strange, and I am still trying to figure our why. And it stays with me." More than two years later, she is still trying to understand the experience as it was totally unexpected.

Worship was part of our daily schedule. In advance of the trip and as part of their grade, students chose and prepared a short worship service to be shared in a particular spot on the journey. This integration of worship and theology of place was identified as significant. It provided a daily opportunity, amid the busyness of travel, to slow down and reflect, if only for a few minutes, on the significance of a place. Hearing the words "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:3) as you sit on the Mount of the Beatitudes, or "You are my beloved" as you dip your hands in the Jordan River, made Scripture come alive, not just in the moment but even after

participants came home. The opportunity to worship on the Sea of Galilea was most meaningful. The student brought a fishing net from home and had all of us sit in the boat holding the net as he offered his reflection. It was a deeply emotional experience. As a reminder of the moment, the student cut up the net and gave each of us a section to bring home. These opportunities for worship were highly valued by all participants and will be incorporated into future pilgrimage courses.

Maybe because so many of the stories about Jesus revolve around the sea, or because the centuries between the time of Jesus and now have not really changed the terrain, being on the sea or walking along the shoreline where Jesus called his first disciples was identified as one of the most spiritually rich places for participants. "It seemed the most untouched over the centuries, and one could imagine it 2000 years ago." Another academic component of the trip was to choose an archaeological site that we would visit, research it, and provide a class presentation in advance of the trip. This shared knowledge helped prepare students for some of the places we would visit and highlighted questions for our guide. Following the trip, students submitted a longer research paper. Although students appreciated this deeper analysis of the archaeological evidence and history of a place, this research revealed a desire for a more practical pastoral ministry focus. One student suggested "something like a sermon series where the students have to prepare sermons on the pericopes of where they are going to be and then after, seeing if their sermons would change because of what they have experienced and what they now know." This would further integrate the experience with their field education and is an excellent suggestion.

One of the benefits of the trip for the students who were serving congregations and preaching regularly was increased confidence in their own understanding of the context of Scripture or, as one person said, "a feeling of knowing . . . I can picture what it looks like." Another student said, "I no longer rely so heavily on somebody else's exegesis . . . I understand more of the context and what's going on in the story." In response, another agreed, adding that she still found value in commentaries, but, because of her own experience, what she is reading or listening to in a podcast is "more three dimensional." Another student identified having a map of Israel on her office wall and being able to understand the movement taking place in each passage because she had traveled the land and then was able to convey that experience in her preaching.

COVID-19 pandemic restrictions meant that worship services moved from in-person to online shortly after we returned, and almost all the "preachers" in the group spoke of the value in using their photos to enhance sermons and virtual worship. One minister who had taken the trip as part of her continuing education leave was very intentional to make use of her experience in the educational and spiritual life of the congregation. She wanted to make sure that the congregation understood that the trip was not a vacation but that it had value for the life of faith community. "Right after we got back was Lent so I did Facebook Lessons from the Holy Land reflections." By

combining personal reflections and photos taken on the trip, everyone in her congregation could appreciate the value of the journey and see that it was not a vacation. Two years later, she used Facebook to offer “15 Minutes a Day with God Lenten Challenge” with a combination of Scripture, a photo from the trip, and reflective questions, once again highlighting the value of the pilgrimage in the life of the congregation she serves. These creative ideas have sparked assignment options for students on future trips.

COVID-19 pandemic restrictions postponed one participant’s plan for an in-person presentation for two years. When she was finally able to make the presentation, she said, “Revisiting my notes and the photographs and then sharing it with people was a wonderful experience for them and for me . . . it kind of solidified the trip.” It is important for students to have opportunities in their field education sites to share their experiences and process their learning.

Reflecting on the trip after two years was very meaningful. Many had not spent much time thinking deeply about the impact of the trip on their professional life or personal life of faith and, as a professor, I had not sought this depth of reflection and insights on the experience. What became most clear was that travel to the Holy Land “puts color to the Scriptures” and makes the biblical story multidimensional. As one student said, “I can hear the bells on the sheep and the goats, feel the heat of the sun and the smell of the dust at Masada.” We tasted fresh figs and olives and saw the changing landscape from the desolate desert to green pastures.

All our senses were engaged when we were privileged to be guests in a home for a Shabbat dinner; seeing the candles lit, touching the bread as it was broken, tasting the wine that was poured, smelling the food that had been prepared, and hearing the ancient words of prayer. It reminded us that there is so much more to experience on a trip to Israel and Palestine than just the land.

Hearing the voices and perspectives of different people helped broaden our worldview. Listening to our Arab bus driver, the Palestinian Christian guide in Bethlehem, an Israeli settler in Shiloh, and our secular Jewish guide for the trip, as well as spending time with leaders in two organizations working to promote peace between Israel and Palestine, made it clear just how complicated the relationships are in this holy land. Participants came home ready to share a more nuanced understanding of the complexity of the situation than is often reported in the news.

In retrospect, as participants took the time to reflect and ponder their experience, valuable insights surfaced. As one student said, “I really wish I had been more intentional in some of my own preparation for the trip . . . knowing the stories.” Participants had a detailed schedule of the trip, and Scripture references were provided relevant to each place; however, many students did not make the time to familiarize themselves with the biblical texts and the stories in advance of the trip. Encouraging such preparation and

incorporating journal writing with a before, during, and after the trip reflection for various places could be very helpful.

Travellers returned from the trip with a multi-sensory, embodied experience of Scripture and a deeper understanding of the context and culture of Israel and Palestine. This experience has translated into creative educational ideas for their congregations, greater confidence in preaching, a more nuanced biblical understanding, and a deepened personal faith.

The words of St Jerome are true: having read the Fifth Gospel by travelling to the land called Holy, the world of the other four Gospels is opened in a way that will forever impact the life and ministry of these leaders in the church.

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<sup>1</sup> Patricia O'Connell Killen, "Midrange Reflection: The Underlying Practice of Wabash Center Workshops, Colloquies, and Consultations," *Teaching Theology and Religion* 10, no. 3 (2007): 144.

<sup>2</sup> Sarah Baxter, as cited in Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat, "Book Review: *Spiritual Places: Inspired Traveller's Guide* by Sarah Baxter, Spirituality & Practice, <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/view/28532/spiritual-places>.