

MID-EAST TRAVELOGUE

May 25, 1:30 a.m., my plane descended into Amman, Jordan—ancient “Rabbah” or “Rabbath-Amon”—great city of the *Ammonites* (the name given to the peoples settled in the region as early as 1200 b.c.e.); the city captured by Hebrew King David early in the 10th century b.c.e.

A taxi from Queen Alia airport took me north along a dark highway, past stone buildings with keyhole windows, to a bed at the small family-type Hisham Hotel a couple of blocks south of the French Embassy on Zahran Street.

After a little sleep, my morning guide, Palestinian Elias in his red-checked *kafiyeh*, brought me first to the still-used Roman amphitheater, believed built by Romans in the second century c.e. and a few minutes’ walk east of downtown. The amphitheater now can seat five to six thousand but, according to Elias, anciently of Romans it could seat only 4,000. Boys played in the coolness of the arched “Odeon,” a small theater at right of the amphitheater entry, while I ran my hands over a sculpted torso of Hercules at left.

At the immediate front of the amphitheater are the remains of a colonnaded square, part of the ancient city forum. I imagined imperial chariots drawing up with a flourish before the entry’s pillars. Across, city life on the Qu’aysh thoroughfare was busy as it is in large cities anywhere--a bustling array of Arabic signs over shops and stalls, and an intensively preoccupied throng of people. Elias and I took a taxi to the foot of the Citadel, “Jabal al-Qa’la;” and he walked me at a steady pace up to the hilltop ruins, site of Rabbath-Amon’s ancient acropolis of that city later named “Philadelphia,” that became the southernmost of the ten Greco-Roman league cities of the *Decapoli* region. As Philadelphia it later was incorporated by Roman

Emperor Trajan *circa* 106 c.e. into Rome's then-province of "Arabia," and prospered from its location along the *Via Nova Traiana*, Trajan's trade and administrative road.

The Citadel has been found as occupied as early as the Neolithic period and fortified *circa* 1800 b.c.e., during the Bronze Age. Its history spans all periods of ancient Mid-East superpowers--Assyria in eighth century b.c.e., down through Babylonia in the sixth, post-Alexander the Great successors (Ptolemies in Egypt and Seleucids in 'Syria') to the first, then Rome.

The Citadel mount (*jebel*) is one of seven on and around which is built the present metropolis of Amman. As the mount falls away, the densely built city dips before it and then rises again to the horizon. Seeing the city from there is much like overlooking an even more crowded San Francisco from one of its hills. Here, the sun is hot, the sky such a light blue it almost is white and the architecture, all stone or concrete flat-roofed buildings, lots of colorful laundry hanging from apartment windows.

As we stood facing toward Damascus, I tried to imagine the walled city mount as it was when all that lay before and around was bare land. Elias himself recounted the various conquerors that commanded Amman's heights before Rome: the Ammonites, Nabataeans, Babylonians, Hebrews, and Macedonian Greeks. "Yes," he assured me, "native Jordanians have Greek blood too."

Parts of enormous, stacked-stone city wall still stand on the citadel's east side. There I imagined it as it was three thousand years ago, when beneath it Bath-Sheba's husband, Uriah, fell in battle with the Ammonites (King David, as we know, having arranged that Uriah be placed at the front). Also facing east, six imposing 33-foot high stone pillars rise over the remains of the great Temple of Hercules, dated to between 162 and 166 c.e.; and nearby are

remains of another temple, where it is claimed that Herod Antipas placed John the Baptist's head on display.

In Roman times 7,000 soldiers were housed in the Citadel, Elias says, pointing out niches inside the wall where sentries stood guard. A sauna room still is visible, with openings in its floor tiles for heat to emerge from an oven sunk beneath. Elias was careful to hold me back from the edge of a deep cistern at the right of the vestibule. Fed by rainwater through an inlet channel, and capable of holding up to 250,000 gallons of water, the system was a foil to the common ancient enemy tactic of thirsting people's surrender of walled cities.

Some of the original carved stone stairs still exist down the rocky slope from Citadel mount. I rested my hands on Elias' back while we descended, as he said, "the old way." Lunch at a local restaurant was *fasooliyah*--green bean, lamb and tomato stew; a mid-east staple dish served with a side of yellow saffron rice. After lunch I had my first experience with a "squat" toilet, its opening flush with the tile of the floor. (Being aware in the premises, I had opted to wear no slacks on the trip—just long skirts and, well, no 'briefs'!)

The next day was to be a tour I had arranged with Ameen, a friend of the Hisham and another displaced Palestinian, who had come to Jordan to work as a taxi driver after the '67 war....

May 26, 8:30 a.m. Ameen and I headed north to the country of the "Gadarenes/Gerasenes" and ancient Gadara, in the region of the southeast Sea of Galilee/Lake Tiberias (*cf.* Mark 5 *et seq.* and Matt. 8:28 *et seq.*). We were near Magdalene country, from which word of Jesus' preachings went out through the Decapoli. The ancient city of Gerash or Jerash (an easy day-trip from Amman; some 12 miles southeast of the sea) is one of the best preserved cities of the Decapoli.

The soaringness of Jerash's arches and the massiveness of stone construction was exhilarating. Excavations and restorations have involved a Temple of Artemis, two theaters, and an unusual oval Forum. Words are impossible of doing justice to the scope of columned thoroughfares, plazas, and structures. I bought copies of sketches of what it was like in its original state (done, I believe, by an Englishman), which speak for themselves.

Outside at the site's small, neat courtyard bazaar, I bought family gifts, telling the seller that it wasn't my policy to bargain people down, since I wanted to guard my entrance to Heaven. When I asked where his Heaven was, a group began to grow around us. One man from another stall told me that no one has seen God, but Moses came closest and it says so in the Qu'ran/Koran. "But we, being only specks, could not see God." I said, "But we still can see each other *in* God when we get there, and I believe I'll see you!" The merchants wound up giving me great bargains on a sand bottle with a desert scene inside and a large plate, besides a deal on the necklace I wasn't going to afford. *I* gave them all a kiss, and they loved that.

Before departing Jerash I returned and had a Turkish coffee with the restaurant's manager, Sami, who I had met on my arrival. I thereby made another friend, and I had a lot of fun uncovering Sami's desire to land a needy middle-aged lady he could serve--one who perhaps would help him "move on...maybe to Italy." I told him he was some 20 years too late with me, but wished him luck and gave him some asked-for advice on how best to proceed!

From Jerash about 15 miles past olive groves took us to Ajlun. There, one crosses a drawbridge to reach the site of restored Qala'atar-Rabad, an Arabian fortress castle built about 1184 c.e. by Saladin's nephew and military commander, 'Izz ad-Din Urama bin Munqidh, as defense against Crusaders. One well can understand choice of the site, with its commanding views of three wadis leading to it, and the Jordan Valley to the west (a "wadi" being a narrow

valley, gully, or streambed that is dry except during rainy seasons). The castle is an endurance test--a maze of staircases, vaults, and towers. As I explored, an Arabian matriarch of advanced age, needful of rest even more than I was, proudly introduced me to the other three generations of her family group.

Despite great interest in “Philip” of the *New Testament*, I spent so much time at Jerash and Ajlun that I had to skip going further to Pella. On the Jordan River’s east bank, it was inhabited as early as 5000 b.c.e. Another Macedonian Greek Decapoli city, Pella (pronounced “Bayla”) figures in the “Bethany-Across-the-Jordan” riddle left us by the *New Testament*.

“Hellenic” Pella (as with other cities in the region, after Alexander the Great’s death in fourth century b.c.e.) at various times was under Ptolemaic and Seleucidic rule. Later, for a short while after Herod the Great’s death at the turn of the millennium, Pella was in the territory inherited by Philip, the Great’s son by a mysteriously unknown “Cleopatra of Jerusalem.” Philip’s half-brother was Herod Antipas (son of Malthace “of the Samaritan nation” and the Great). Antipas’ alliance with Rome figured greatly in events preceding Rome’s ultimate conquest.

Foregoing Pella, it was on instead to Jordan’s northwest corner and Umm Qais/Umm Qeis, ancient Gadara of the Decapoli. Founded in third century b.c.e. by the Ptolemies, Alexander the Great’s successors in Egypt, Umm Qais overlooks the Sea of Galilee to the west and the Golan Heights to the north, beneath which meet Syria/Jordan/Israel borders.

Like Rabbath-Amon, a parade of history walked Umm Qais’ flagged streets: captured from the Ptolemy dynasty in 198 b.c.e.; taken by the Hebrews in 100; then conquered by Roman General Pompey in 63. Hot springs nearby were a spa for the Romans, during whose hegemony Umm Qais flourished. Herod the Great (a supporter of Rome and directed by Mark Antony)

ruled Umm Qais until his death, being given it for successfully conquering the adjacent Nabataeans to break their control of regional trade routes. After the Great's death Umm Qais reverted to being part of Rome's province of 'Syria'.

Tears fell as I walked the massive stone road that leads west, at which end the "Tiberias Arch" once stood above the sea. Returning from there, temporarily lost as to how to exit the site, I kindly was led out by a man with his several children. His family totaled 10, he told me as we walked, and showed me his pay slip from the refinery where he worked--416 dinars a month; about \$624 U.S.

Back on the road, driving north up a mountain between the Jordan Valley and Amman, an oncoming car made a bad pass. Ameen turned as it went past, made a scissors-like gesture, and said something that sounded like "Al-K-otho-genitals-genitals-genitals," which last words I'm certain he really didn't say; but it sounded so appropriate I felt for a moment as if the Holy Ghost had settled a linguistic revelation on me. Shortly thereafter he and I had a good laugh, because Omar, the Hisham's manager, kept checking on us by cell phone. (When we got back Mr. Hisham himself was there to greet me and gave me a duffel bag complete with Hisham Hotel logo, to carry back to the states.)

Nine p.m., after a shower and fending off starvation with a chocolate bar and a Johnny Walker out of my room's minibar, I chatted with Khaled, the night clerk while waiting for dinner (spaghetti Bolognese and fresh vegetables; and coffee never tasted so good!). Khaled and I had a nice exchange about what "Palestine" really meant to him. "Jordan and Israel together really were 'Palestine,'" he commented. "It might be said that *all* of us are Bedouin descendents, from desert-dwelling nomadic pastoralists throughout most of the desert belt--from the western desert, Sinai, and Negev to the Arabian desert."

Climbing afterward to my room and beckoning sleep, I asked myself what was the best part of the day. Couldn't say whether it altogether was the constant awareness of *being*, of seeing exactly what I had hoped to see and of having lived long enough and strong enough to be doing it, or the *people*—the polite graciousness of wonderful people I had met, the children with whom I felt so natural, all the smiles, and the spontaneous hugs....

May 27.... Very early, Ameen and I commenced a “desert castle” loop, picking up the two-lane highway just south of Amman to travel eastward toward Iraq. Our first stop was Qsar al-Kharaneh, an eighth century c.e., 61-room Ummayid castle. I tried to draw a mental picture of what it would have been like to see that rock castle rise out of nowhere in that great expanse of desert, which reached to far horizon hills of shadowed pink ocre.

Ameen waited in the car while I explored. Only 60, his physical condition was that of a much older man. *Yo Allah*, “Oh, god,” he would say softly, each time he pushed his back from the driver's seat....

Alone in the castle, the solitary guide, dark-faced in his long white dress and *kafiyeh*, made me nervous. I felt that he rarely saw other persons, especially women, for as we walked the structure he seemed to touch me on occasion when there was no need. I took time, however, to make a rough sketch of decorations around a high-ceilinged arch; but I confess that I cut that exploration short!

We continued along highway 40 to Qusayr 'Amra, built in the early eighth century as a rest pavilion for hunting parties of the ruling Ummayid clan. The most outstanding features were the reception hall and baths, both richly decorated with fascinating murals reflecting the secular art of its time. The Bedouin guide there was more agreeable, showing me how the water wheel pumped water to the baths from a 40-foot well. An opening in the ceiling of a main room served

as a clock, as a spot of sunlight through an opening in the roof moved around the floor

Continuing east to a juncture of highways 40, 30, and route 5, the desert continued to stretch flat east toward Iraq--colorless dun terrain touched with pink, broken now and then by little sand cyclones. The noon sun now only barely struck my shoulder, which today I covered over yesterday's sunburn. When we passed a wetland preserve, I wondered what California's Yolo County folk would think about calling the (*modest* is far insufficient a word!) greenery of this oasis a "wetland."

Further north on route 5, we reached the castle of Qsar al-Azraq on the west edge of the Azraq oasis. Azraq is a small town and the castle, built 200 years before Christ, is near the town entrance. Carved stones bear records of Roman emperors; centuries later the Ummayids built a small mosque in the center of the compound.

The castle's entry doors are stone rectangles, each weighing a ton with hewn stone 'hinges' that fit into the sides of the stone threshold. Qsar al-Azraq, originally three stories high, was partially destroyed by an earthquake but one large second-floor room is still intact. And there, under the imposing ceiling arch, Lawrence of Arabia rested during his historical unification of Arabian tribes to assist England in World War I. The guide proudly showed me old newspaper clippings and a photograph of Lawrence with a pleasant-faced elderly man, the guide's great-grandfather. There was a bit of melancholy for me in the recall (as there was for Lawrence, greatly) in the aftermath of promises made....

Back on 5 to the junction with 30, then northeast to Hammam As-Sarakh, another Ummayid bath house--small but charming; a boy pointed out the two bath sides--one for males, the other, females. Blackened posts beneath the now-missing bath floor testified to the water-heating fire once stoked in that cellar beneath.

Our next stop was at Qsar Al-Hallabat, the only Roman ruin out in that desert and of which remained only a small part of the structure. I lingered amid a heap of the fallen rubble beneath that one tension arch, in wonder at its lasting height and what it must have taken to erect its stones--some 3 by 15 by 2 feet—that have stood for two millennia.

We finished the day's journey east and down through Zarqa back to Amman. Ameen explained how he stays in Jordan to work but his home is in the Jordan's west bank. Of three wives, the first had only five girls; the second, one girl and two boys. His new wife (which, he said, his mother insisted he take) has a first child due this month. A good number of sons is important in the old culture, to form a bedrock for future sustenance; but Ameen claimed he likes girls best. "When I go home," he says, "my daughters greet me with great gladness and solicitation: 'Here, dear father, sit down!--would you like a cup of tea?--some food?' The boys," Ameen finished (tightening his face and shadowing his eyes), "Give me hard looks."

May 28.... A decidedly more restful day, after a late breakfast in Hisham's charming patio restaurant, I found another taxi driver, Marwan, at the corner; and I commenced a visit to the two folklore museums adjacent to the amphitheater. One displayed garb, jewelry, and distinctly different, hand-worked designs from Hebron, Ramallah, and Bethlehem. In the second museum was a Bedouin tent scene with dressed figures, one a woman in a richly decorated curtained litter on a camel.

From there I had Marwan take me up again to the acropolis site and spent a great time in the museum there. It was a treasure trove of archeological items and history from the Bronze Age forward--to cite only a few: a large stone façade of Artagatas (Nabataean goddess of fruits and fertility wearing an eagle headdress); a statue of Apollo that was found at Sebaste; a statue of Daedalus found at the Citadel; two first-century-c.e. carved stone heads from Qadriel Bint,

Petra's main temple; a carved male stone head showing a "Phrygian" cap (possibly a Nabataean priest); a mottled clay statue dated 8000-6000 b.c.e. (believed the earliest statue ever attempted); and--most phenomenal of all for me (I could not believe my luck!)—in a glass case, reproductions of sections of the famous Copper Scroll! *(It would be to my great dismay later on the airplane home, looking through photos developed in Jerusalem just before departure, that the ones I had been allowed to take of the scrolls were not there!)*

In the afternoon Marwan took me to a shop where the owner, Samir, a friendly young man studying to be a lawyer, helped me spend about \$75 on gifts. Samir draped a *kafiyeh* around my head and Marwan took a picture of us together, surrounded by the incredible array of the shop's artwork. *Another great day!!....*

May 29th, a day to write postcards and pack for departure to Petra on the morrow. My waiter at lunch in Hisham's patio was Yousef, also Palestinian but lastly from Kuwait. He spoke sadly of his losses under Saddam Hussein's aggression ("I lost everything in '91--more than 150,000 JD's"). Yousef, who works 14 hours a day, seven days a week, had been unsuccessful at obtaining a U.S. visa, but hoped now perhaps to get to Saudi Arabia to find a more reasonable existence.

Yousef spoke of how it is necessary for the people in the region to value life first, stop killings, work together. Yet he believed the governments and wealthy powers really did not want to see "the Palestinian problem" solved. "Palestinians in Jordan, like in Kuwait," he claimed, "are the main labor force in exiled society. All want to return home and would, if they could."

In my room after dinner I cried aloud, fatigue mixing with sadness from plights of individuals here, plus all the global horrors covered in the International Herald Tribune bought at

a bookshop near the Hisham. At one a.m., feeling chilled, I feared being sick. I had antibiotic with me, but after a deep sleep following meditation I awakened perfectly sound without it.

May 30th --south from Amman toward Petra; another all-day affair, first through Moab's mountains to Mt. Nebo and its memorial to Moses. Sitting on a clear day (such as we had) at the precipice of a spectacular plateau, one sees as far as Jerusalem's spires and the Dead Sea.

Franciscans bought the Mt. Nebo site in the 1930's and excavated the ruins of a church and monastery reportedly mentioned by a Roman nun ("Etheria"), as far back as 394 c.e.

Sixth century Byzantine mosaics inside the present church are splendid intricacies of patterns. Across the original stone and mosaic slab flooring, near the altar, a catholic mass was in progress for a tourist group. It startled me, hearing *New Testament* liturgy; and I thought about Zipporah, daughter of Midian's high priest Reuel and Moses' first wife, from the south of Jordan, who he had to "keep in the closet (so to speak)," when his organized army of immigrants out of Egypt initially objected to that familial union....

Onward to Madaba and its Greek Orthodox church, with its icons, paintings, crystal chandeliers, and vaunting gold-haloed Jesus in the nave. A cordoned mosaic map on the church floor was unearthed in 1884, the "oldest preserved, most detailed ancient map of the lands east and west of the River Jordan, from Lebanon to Egypt and from the desert to the Mediterranean."

10 a.m., HOT already.... The two-lane road south of Madaba is lined with pines like those seen on the Jerash trip--trees which at home would be considered sparse and dry; here, revered as a forest. *How does one describe this landscape?* I do not try.

Reluctantly I did need to make an occasional sacrifice timewise. Much as I would have liked to see it, we didn't take the side road to the fortress of Qalat al-Mishnaqa, better known as Mekawer or Machaerus--as first century c.e. historian Josephus described it, on "a very rocky

hill, elevated to a great height...ditched about with...valleys on all sides, and to such a depth that the eye cannot reach their bottoms.” It was at Machaerus that Herod Antipas imprisoned and murdered John the Baptist. (*Maybe it’s just as well I miss Machaerus, I thought, the way I feel about young Salome’s bad rap....*)

Coming down a hill, a first glimpse of the Dead Sea, its ‘oriental turquoise’ stretching along the roadway in some places not more than 10 or 12 feet above the water. I recalled Josephus’ story about how the Romans enjoyed throwing a man into the sea, hands and feet bound, to see the spectacle of its extreme buoyancy.

Ameen turned left toward some bordering bare mountains, past Bedouin tents and donkeys playing in the roadway. The mountains are fierce looking in their barrenness. What determination there had to have been, to build a fortress on any of them! Another turn, down another little hill, we reached the motionless expanse of the sea. Across it, yellow-white “sand rain” hazed desolate cliffs. Ameen took me to see a now-deserted beach resort area, where I took a picture of my foot in the water at the Dead Sea’s edge....

The next stop along the “King’s Highway” would be Kerak, or “al-Karak,” in biblical times a town on the trade caravan route between Egypt and Syria. Kerak (in the Bible, found as *Kir, Kir Moab* or *Kir Heres*) regained prominence in the first half of the 12th century c.e., when Crusader King Baldwin I of Jerusalem had a castle fortress built there.

Meanwhile, Ameen is “singing” again, which he does at regular intervals; I conclude it is his form of prayer. This time in the middle of it he stifled a big yawn. “Look!” he pointed afterward, “Banana plantation.” Not having had breakfast, I murmured, “Wouldn’t I love having a banana now.” But I knew Allah would will me to eat when it was time, although the very necessary bottled water supply was getting low. I distracted myself with recall of the tale of

Renauld de Chatillon, governor of fort Kerak before it fell finally to Saladin in 1188 c.e. Reportedly, de Chatillon had the swell habit of throwing his enemies over the battlements of the castle, first putting a wooden box over their heads so they didn't lose consciousness before hitting the valley below....

The 1000-meter climb up to Kerak castle is immediate. Despite the good condition of Ameen's '80 Mercedes, its engine begged once or twice for mercy. "It's okay," Ameen reassured me. "It's coming *down* that's dangerous--"*yo Allah!*"

Kerak...ancient capital of the Moabite kingdom; later seat of a Byzantine bishopric; known mainly, as said, as a Crusader fort. I avoided the smartly-dressed young English-speaking guide at the gate but was a sucker for the Bedouin haunting the place inside. Good thing, too; because he showed me the torso in the rock, the obscure staircase to the top, and the hand-hewn stone balls thrown over the ramparts upon enemies. An old man, watery glassed green-grey eyes, he said nothing--merely pointed and mimicked; I gave him five dinars. I doubt my photos will do justice to Kerak's incredible construction....

Afterwards, wondering, I asked Ameen how much guides get. Ameen exclaimed, *very* excited, "You go with a *guide*???" He had told me repeatedly, "Better alone!" "Oh, *no*, Ameen," I evaded lying outright, "I didn't go with *the* guide," because I *had* avoided the "official" one.

Lunch never was more welcomed: bananas and fresh flat bread that tasted like pizza crust (Ameen gave me its Arabic name; I gave him a pretty good guttural echo but can't remember it.) Down off the Kerak road we passed fruit stands. Ameen stopped and came back cradling a dozen apricots to add to our feast.

At that point we were about two-thirds the way from Amman to Petra, where I would stay and need to bid Ameen farewell...red dirt, some agriculture on small parcels, the ubiquitous

stone houses, then bare land again; a herd of sheep; wind tearing through the car's open windows. We came to a large village, more like a small city—Tafila; olive and fruit tree groves; no English signs. To come out of stark mountains and desert into a bustling city was a novel experience for me, although perhaps would not be so for an Arizonan or New Mexican. “Is this a Palestinian village?” I asked. “No,” Ameen replied, “Jordanian Bedouin.” *Will I ever get the ‘ethnicities’ straight?* I wondered.

Ameen stopped again and this time he came back with something wrapped in paper. “*Not more food!*” I exclaimed. “*Not food--sweets!*” Ameen replied: *halubh/hallub?*--deep-friend rings, crispy on the outside and soft insides that look like a slightly lumpy flower mixture dripping oil. “Have another!” Ameen commanded, using one of my wipes on his bushy moustache. “I buy two for Madame and three for me.” *At this rate, I thought, I won't need dinner.*

Such a mix--the houses, a great number of them large and ornate in the Arab tradition; large in-between spaces and no fences; grazing goats and, amidst the scrub brush, bedouin-garbed people, an old man and his loaded donkey walking the road. Stone walls, and rocks, rocks, rocks; beyond gorges the landscape receded in that pastel-tinted sun-haze that makes one think one's eyeglasses need cleaning....

Time for a ‘cleanup’ (I confess I was having some thoughts about a nice cool room, no clothing, and a good cup of coffee). I rolled up the window so as to give a combing to my hair, taking it down from its pins, barrette, and bandeau. Catching a glimpse of myself in the right-hand rear-view mirror, it appeared the sun was bleaching my hair full white once and for all. It took but a couple of minutes to comb, but as I retied the bandeau at the nape of my neck I almost prayed to some god to make my fingers do it quicker so I could get the window back down

before I expired.

Ameen was singing again, while I thought, *any middle-aged lady who thinks she's getting incontinent ought to come to the mid-east: almost a quart of water today and I've peed only once....*

Our car was stopped by soldiers a second time this day--a lot of loud talking and worrisome gesturing. Nearby vendors, knowing Ameen from his frequent tourist trips, came over in support. Soon all joined in hand-shaking and smiles. When we came back around to the road, one of the officers gave me a big wave and a wide, white-toothed smile, "Welcome!" he called out. "They need to make their quota of stops; that's all," Ameen supplied.

It was getting late. Another but less difficult decision was to skip the 12th century castle at Qasr Al-Shawbak/Shobak. I needed to conserve some energy for getting settled at Petra. Near Shobak we passed the largest amount of green seen yet, in a little lowland otherwise surrounded by the familiar dun-colored rocky landscape and low hills to the west. "Apple trees," Ameen said, pointing to small groves climbing a terraced hill. On the lowland the four p.m. sun was creating a sharp shadow-orchard on the grassless ground between the rows of slender trees; and I thought of the green growth amidst my sister's Oregon apple orchard, that requires regular clearing....

Ameen stopped for gasoline in Wadi Musa, the small town that adjoins Petra and is dominated by the Movenpick luxury hotel. My hotel, however, was the small Flowers—two blocks that felt like 20 uphill from the Movenpick. Not exactly the Hisham, but my second-floor room was "homey" as to furnishings and curtains, with lots of light. Exhausted, I cleaned up a bit and went down to the reception area, where Ameen sat with Yahya (John), the Flowers' owner.

John had specifically come to greet me after talking with Omar of the Hisham. (*Oh, oh....mistake?* I worried. I had left generous gratuities at the Hisham but had to tighten the belt here on....)

After my reluctant long goodbye to Ameen, John served me Arabic coffee. His great-great-great-grandparents were “of the original Bedouins of the region,” he explained, as he showed me his large wall map of the Petra site—much to see, in only two days!

At 9 p.m. after a wonderful shower and nap I was the only patron in the restaurant that occupied the Flowers’ entire top floor. Carved, highly polished high-backed chairs were inset with embroidered velvet-cotton, their backs and seats cushioned in deep red and pale green. French brocade curtains hung high on the surrounding windows, and pastel paintings of Arab street scenes adorned the walls.

John appeared and opened wide the window next to my table. The lights of the city ran brightly up the hill beyond, the night prayer song vibrant on the cool night air. The chant, each time I heard it, caused a peaceful feeling in my solar plexus--can’t explain why; it just felt good. I asked John about the practice.

“Five times a day,” he explained, “the call comes to prayer.” He sang some words and then patiently helped me record the sounds in my journal. Being again treated like “royalty,” I thought, *I will try to repay it by being a good-will ambassador.* The tourist business there was everything, the main months being April and October. “We’ll have more conversation later,” John said, leaving me to my dinner.

I was served the traditional appetizer--a small plate of hummus (cooked chickpeas ground into a paste, mixed with tahini, garlic, and lemon, and decorated with leaves and tomatoes); a salad of finely chopped tomatoes and cucumbers (a variation of *tabbouleh*); flattened chicken

breast with a crusty breaded coating; the (ubiquitous, it seems--the Hisham also served--) French fries of the thick variety; and pocket bread to eat with the hummus or to make one's own little chicken sandwich.

May 31.... In the morning I was at the Petra site's gate when it opened at 6 a.m., the sun just beginning to hit the tops of the cliffs. After a hearty walk I made my way through the *siq*, "the shaft," a part at places only nine feet wide, through a narrow dark gorge formed from a deep split in the sandstone rock—

And there it was!: the famous "al-Khaznah," "The Treasury," itself carved out of a sandstone rock cliff. I have no words worthy to describe the majesty of its beautiful façade, its tall portico with six columns, and ornate niches showing remnants of the full statues they once held. Nor would I try in words to capture the thrill I felt finally to see it; but I allowed myself to look at it a long time, before I crossed its small courtyard to the entrance.

Existing as capital city of the Nabataeans about the sixth century b.c.e., it wasn't until 1812 c.e. that explorer Johann Ludwig Burckhardt introduced Petra to the world. Ancient historians wrote of it as both a fortress and center of Nabataean caravan trade between Gaza west, Damascus north, Aqaba and Red Sea south, and across desert to the Persian Gulf. Archaeology has uncovered Nabataean innovative use of dams to capture water from the region's flash floods, and redirecting and storing supplies by use of conduits and cisterns. Indeed, carved aqueducts ran along the *siq* walls, by which water was brought from springs in the Sharah mountains.

Inside, the Khazneh megastructure's hand-hewing all is beyond imagining. It consists of an immense, cool, high-ceilinged room. Carved stone benches line part of its sides, with two small carved staircases leading up to a niche for a large urn. The "Khazneh" name is said to

derive either from a legend, that thieves or pirates hid their booty in the urn, or from having been an Egyptian pharaoh's treasury during the time of Moses.

A little distance from the Khazeh is an amphitheater cut into the side of a hill, enclosed on three sides by rose-colored mountain walls. Beyond, the terrain opens onto the plain where the full expanse of the common city can be perceived. But rather than venture out into the ruins of the wider city, it was not a hard decision for me to remain within its center--asked as I was, by a guide named Siel, if I would like to ascend to the "high place"(al-Deir or ad-Dayr--dubbed "the monastery"), a steep hour's climb north of the center.

With Siel was his donkey, Jack, who graciously allowed me to board his back and without whom I gravely doubt I would have made it up. The trail, which consumed a nearly half hour by donkey, consisted of some 800 narrow 'steps' hewn into the cliffside (carved, Lord knows how long ago), with an immediate drop-off to the deep gorges below (no guard rails here!).

It was like being at the top of the world. The Monastery, possibly once a temple dedicated to Nabataean king Obodas I in the first century b.c., is similar in construction to the Khasneh, its interior of the same design. But it is more deeply carved at the outer upper level, spires there open to the sky. A flat plaza in front also is carved from the rock; there, Siel, Jack and I rested before the trip down.

Siel, a dark-skinned, fatherly-type Bedouin wearing the standard *kafiyeh*, spoke tolerable English. According to him, the preceding month a tourist climbed to the monastery by foot in the heat of midday, had a heart attack, and died. *Not a bad place to die*, I thought, although I doubted the poor man ever considered his cortege would be on a donkey....

When we descended the steep trail, listening to Jack's clop, clop, clop on the stone

pushed my feet against the stirrups to keep from sliding sidewise on the rough camel-hair saddle; and I thought of Jesus' mother and all like her who had lived life in this fashion...*no wonder she went into labor!* The view across the gorges to the distance, however, was magnificent.

Siel's work territory was clear; he couldn't take me to the gate--a circumstance known by a camel owner nearby; and (you guessed it) I went for yet another memorable ride, through the *siq* and on to the area of the museum on the site.

11:30 a.m., at the museum's tented courtyard restaurant, my journal notes were shaky. I had my first cup of coffee of the day and watched tourists just beginning their inward and upward trek, already red-faced, borne down by backpacks. I was fiercely happy that, informed in the premises, I didn't need to prove my stamina. The 15 dinar (\$22.50 U.S.) I paid for riding Jack was more than worth it.

Siel lived in a cave nearby; and, on the way down I had been invited to tea by his brightly-garbed wife, sitting at the entrance. Apart from knowing it simply was a good business trade, 20 years ago I would have said yes without hesitation; but it takes concentrated and polite diplomacy and patience to be with native-borns anywhere, and my reservoir of energy was not what once it was.

As I ordered my lunch a tour group of 150 Italians invaded the peace and quiet of the courtyard restaurant. "Italians are like Arabs and both of them, like Spaniards," my waiter whispered with a smile and a gesture that indicated "motor-mouthed." *What do I look like?* I wondered—'American?'

From a table nearby, Ghassam, a young Bedouin living with his mother also in a nearby cave, made my acquaintance. Bedouins once lived in caves throughout Petra's site, he informed me; but the government now had restricted dwellings to a farther radius. "Would I like to visit

his family, some 25 minutes away?” Again, an offer I had to decline; but I valued our ensuing conversation about Nabataean history....

Per Ghassam, it long has been believed that Nabataeans arrived in the region from Yemen, via Saudi Arabia; but evidently recent Yemen discoveries may change concepts about Nabataean origins. Statues of Nabataean gods such as Dhu-Shara and Uzza were destroyed when Rome occupied the Petra region, I learned; and it was the Romans who caused carving of Petra’s amphitheater, by enslaved Nabataeans.

I couldn’t recall exactly when Rome reached the region but did remember that Alexander the Great didn’t exactly best the Nabataeans. They seemed most able to hold their own for some time, and Herod the Great even wound up allying with them.

When I asked Ghassam what language the Nabataeans spoke, the word sounded like *Farisi*, allegedly very close to ancient Hebrew. When I queried “Aramaic?” Ghassam said he believed so. I made a note to find out about that. By then, however (having not eaten since last night’s arrival dinner, albeit late), all I could think was, *by now the barbecue fire, for which all patrons are waiting, should be going well enough to start cooking!*

Meanwhile, I learn more from Ghassam about the “bedouin” (a word I’m not certain should be capitalized?—does it denote ethnicity or lifestyle??) “The government has built many houses for bedouin to take the place of Petra caves,” Ghassam continued. “However, many who dwell in the houses still prefer tents.” Indeed, yesterday on the trip down, I had seen bedouin residents keeping and feeding their herd on land surrounding house *and* tent.

Ah! Lunch, finally announced....

After lunch the museum kept me busy at least two hours. There were no brochures about

its contents and too much to see. Amidst the collection: a small bronze bust of curly-haired, long-bearded Dhu-Shara and a seven-inch figure of Isis, along with other figures and inscriptions from Petra's Temple of Winged Lions (which temple, dedicated to Isis and Osiris, also identifies with Uzza or al-'Uzza-Aphrodite); eggshell-thin Nabataean pottery of pure clay; and a sixth century b.c.e. statuette of Osiris.

At the risk of overburdening descriptions, I also must mention the small, slender, jug-shaped vials (*unquentaria*) for scented oils and perfumes, which put me in mind again of the Magdalene. And--recalling the big deal made in Scripture about Ashtoreth worship--how innocuous looked the clay figurines of mother-goddess Astarte. Among ancient coins was a silver of Trajan, 98-117 c.e.; and a 2-1/4 x 1-1/4 x 1/2 inch cuneiform tablet inscribed "Contract between two Aramaeans and an Edomite in the first year of Darius," which recalled the political intrigue that followed Cyrus the Great's death. A first century c.e. 12 x 12 foot slab of mosaic floor, from the main room of an ancient Nabataean villa in Wadi Musa, was unique in its incorporation of four colors of stones....

The name "Uzza" stayed with me. I remembered its appearance in confusingly irresolvably-mixed *Old Testament* Benjamin-Manasseh genealogies and ethnicities after the Babylonian conquest. I recalled Ahihud, brother of (Benjamin-) Uzza ("brother of mystery"), and extant inscribed clay tablets (*ostraca*) from an unknown "Temple of Uzza," which tablets indicated a tax-exempt structure in the ancient Hebron region.

Scripture also reports the death of one Uzza at an unknown threshing floor site during King David's moving of the Ark of the Covenant. That Uzza was son of Abinadab, with whom the Ark had rested two decades; and kings Manasseh and Amon had been buried in a "Garden of Uzza," also an unknown site....

I paused when I exited the museum site, to watch the enduring white-robed older Bedouin guides on foot, some with pure white headdresses, patiently listening to the same chatter from their hirers, and the young handsome ones that galloped by on horses, headdresses flying in the wind. I found it incredible, though, how many tourists take a one-day Petra trip out of Amman--the hot drive down, the impossible breadth of the site. It's a wonder there weren't more cardiacs.

In the jargon of my youth, I myself was "bushed," a condition spied by one of the astute young horsemen; but, as I explained, I was almost clean out of funds. "No matter!" he said, hoisting me up, and took a kiss on the cheek as a tip along with the pittance left in my pocket....

Before hiking up to Flowers I ensconced myself in the luxurious Movenpick atrium, a mosaic-tiled central palazzo complete with spouting fountain, four-story-high glass dome skylight, and (unbelievable!) ivory-mosaic-inlaid throne chairs with silk cushions of green and gold. I sat on a wood frame settee, the high back and sides of which were rows of carved wood filigree, a snifter of brandy and cup of coffee before me, ecstatic I survived to remember the day. My haunches on the soft cushion were gentle reminders of the donkey trip, the half-mile camel ride back through the (shaded!) *siq*, and the breathless ride to Petra's gate.....

June 1.... Breakfast at the Flowers Hotel was an unusual assortment of hummus dishes and something that looked like thick baloney. I was nervous about getting from Petra to Jerusalem the next day, a leg of the journey I not planned ahead of time. The southern crossing was closed. To get to the Allenby/Hussein/Husayn Bridge, one had to go again almost as far as Amman on the east side of the Jordan and circle back down to Jerusalem. Here was where faith needed to set in!

At 9 a.m. John took me for a drive up Wadi Musa's surrounding mountains for a view.

Deep below, the *siq* was but a dark shadow amidst many in the rocks, undiscoverable from any point of the compass. Far across on a topmost mount was the shining Mosque of Haroun/Aaron. John expressed his desire to go to the States, where he has relatives on the east coast. However, as Ameen had noted, it virtually was impossible to get a visa, because so many Palestinians had the same desire. Perhaps if he had a business reason it might be easier? I said, and offered to look into it for him.

Leaving John back at the hotel, I walked leisurely to the Petra site but entered only as far as the “Triclinium” structure. I climbed around and in it and then across the main road and up to a cave opposite, where I sat in perfect comfort a couple of hours and made a small sketch of the “Triclinium.” That was followed by an afternoon lunch at the Bedouin Café on Wadi Musa’s main street—a rice/tomato/vegetable mixture—sharing a table with a young girl, Alex, from Birmingham, England. The rest of the day was devoted to organizing my belongings for the yet-to-be settled journey to Jerusalem. Then at dinner John graciously offered to drive me to the border crossing.

In the evening, boys on the Flowers’ small front patio used heated coals to light their *narghile* (tall ornate water pipe), in which Arabians place flavored tobaccos; and I was treated to a couple of mild, strawberry-tasting puffs. Before retiring I took a last nighttime look around me through the crystal air. Departure was set for seven a.m....

June 2.... We left at 8:30 a.m--later than planned, but the mid-east is a lot like Mexico that way. John drove like a desert wind over the two-lane road, bare rocky terrain stretching east again, occasional patches of green but never the verdant hue of rain-drenched land. Out in the wide spaces one saw bedouin tents, their inhabitants’ figures tiny shadows among their flocks.

The repetitive beat of Arabian popular music over the radio airwaves heightened the

tautness in my solar plexus, the speedometer clocking 130 kilometers an hour along the road once traveled by kings and conquerors on horses and camels. “Don’t worry,” John said, “I am driving 25 years.”

10 a.m.... Making excellent time, traveling west now, having turned just short of Amman; above 30 miles left to the crossing. The road from Rabbah to Jerusalem descends from mountains to hills; the land grows greener, with sparse ‘forests’ on their crowns resembling spindly sentinels. Down we go, through Addassieh/Haddasiah, some terraced agriculture here and there, and amid interspersed barrenness are small spots of villages with what appear to be orchards.

Lower now...into the part of the valley from which Jordan gets most of its fruits and vegetables; buses for the first time along the road; banana groves; trees getting denser--one full-leaved variety covered with bright red blossom clusters. Past the Shounah turnoff I recalled my guess at the length of “Magda’s” trip in *Beloved Disciple*, and asked John how far a person could go one day on a donkey. “About 15 to 20 kilometers,” he estimated. That sounded like I got it right, after all.

For me the Jordan journey was ending. I hadn’t cognated fully how colorless had been the landscapes previously traveled until, through Deir Allah, deep red flowered trees clashed against orange bougainvillea. The speed limit on the straightaway said 80 K and still we were clocking 130. I was praying almost again; but I understood the urgency I sensed now in John. This long drive by him was a favor with no saving grace. Tall trees now lined the road, yellowed Eucalypti. Coming to a rise and seeing two cars passing in the opposite direction I finally couldn’t keep from exclaiming, “Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!” John simply lit another cigarette. *Perhaps I should do the same, I thought...*

Noon, at the border; I arrive with 11 Jordanian dinars and 11 U.S. dollars; and it happens to be the Sabbath, with business half closed down. A quick kiss on John's cheek and long holding of hands; he stresses we must keep in touch. "I'm your brother now," he said. "It's good to have a sister somewhere else in the world, even if I don't see her for another 10 years." Thus my exit from the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, into a tension I did not know before. I was allowed on the Jordanian side to keep my films from passing the x-rays; here now I was not. The air was all serious as I boarded a bus with a three teary Arabian women in long black caftans and white headscarves, leaving family members at the station.

That bus, however, took us only about 100 feet through the Hashemite gate, to the other side where a couple of taxi drivers laconically were hanging out. No bus to Jerusalem was provided, I learned; and the 125-mile trip cost \$90 U.S. *However, I could* cash a traveler's check at the station window, which still was open. Luckily for me I had a check; luckier still, the taxi had air conditioning.

I p.m.--have entered the west bank.... My driver, another Marwan and a Palestinian from Nazareth, laments as we pass through pre-1948 and pre-1967 Palestine territory. I see a first cornfield; a sign for "Mehola" strikes another recall—*where, really, was Elisha's home of "abel-Meholah," where Elijah found him plowing?* If I remembered correctly, scholars have not been able to place it, one consensus being that it was in the north near Scythopolis? *No matter....*

I find jerky journal writing here...*the road seems circuitous. Have gone through Jericho; passed the fenced "Tel-el-Sultan" ruins; now through Hebron and on (through the 'Judaean' desert, the sign says)..... Off east, in the far distance, a glimpse of the Dead Sea but dry, dry, dry here--no vegetation; tufts only of desert grass.... Climbing now from sea level; wearily I keep thinking I should be seeing Jerusalem! And I'm not happy about needing to forego Jericho....*

3 p.m. The taxi drew up to the Armenian Catholic Patriarchate Guest House, 36 Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem's "Old City." The Old City is not even a mile across and less than three miles in circumference, embraced by walls and ramparts built under Ottoman Suleyman "the Magnificent" in the first part of the 16th century c.e. The layout of its streets and walkways largely date to Byzantine times, a twisted maze of alleyways and *sugs/souks*—markets; some in open air, others under roofed or stone walkways. As far as I could tell, my guest house was in the "Muslim" Quarter," which bordered the "Christian" Quarter. (I confess, however, that assigning labels to the sections I would walk eluded me. I only know that the "Muslim" Quarter is the largest and most densely populated one.)

My reserved, second-floor room was comfortably small and convent-pristine, its one window looking down upon the first leg of the Via Dolorosa. But I was dismayed to learn that the hospice hadn't received the box of pocketbook copies of *Beloved Disciple* sent from the States (it being my purported prime cause for the trip). The manager was away, and the young clerk knew nothing of it but gave me the location of their local post office.

4 p.m.... My first need, however, was to get some food. A half block down along the Via Dolorosa took me to the corner with El Wad Street (one of the "Muslim" Quarter's main arteries), where at a stand I bought kabobs (meat, tomato and cucumber slices pushed from a stick into pocket bread; one U.S. dollar).

Staving off starvation, I stood against a stone wall on the edge of a veritable bedlam of stalls, vendors, and mixed peoples. The first to gain my focus were two customarily-attired Muslim women with an older man and a boy. I and one of the women exchanged smiles and, before I knew it, she was over to me, embracing me like a long lost relative. She spoke no English but we made ourselves understood. She was from *Uzza* (!), and ecstatic when I

recognized the name. The exchange restored my energy....

Further up El Wad at Jerusalem Star Restaurant (recommended by the guest house clerk) I paid one dollar (four shekels) for coffee, 50 cents for *baklava/baklawa*, and \$1.20 for orange juice. I was a bit surprised that the owner's eyes didn't light up when I said I'd just come from Jordan--after all, there was dead King Hussein's picture large on the wall with several others of important-looking Arabian men. A group of American travelers then entered, Arizonans and Californians who appeared of Palestinian descent. When my eyes dropped to the oldest one's grey-haired chest I saw a huge cross buried there and then, glancing up to another wall, a photograph of the Pope on his recent visit. Ah...*Christian* Palestinians?

One of the women in the party struck up conversation. Did I like it here? I replied guardedly: "I'm not altogether sure," I hedged. She agreed. She'd been here some years previous, "when it was very nice," she said. "But now it is so *congested*—terrible, for the Holy City." Then she said something she hid from the rest of the room, her hand angled at her mouth: "It's the Muslims...." *Oh, enlightenment comes slowly*, I thought; but clarity was beginning in me.

The Old City maze I would begin to explore on the morrow; now, however, a shower and blessed sleep. A last thought was, *there's a difference between being summoned into existence, and being invited...*

June 3.... In the morning I cashed my last traveler's check at a money-changer, just inside the Damascus Gate on the Old City's north edge; then I circled 'round east to St. Stephen's Gate (*Hebrew*, Lion's Gate). I stood for a while outside the gate, looking down at swift-moving traffic along the Jericho highway in the cleft of the old Kidron valley, and across to the Mount of Olives, now a maze of residential areas and glittering spires of various shrines.

Somewhere over there was the Garden of Gethsemane and the Church of St. Mary Magdalene, neither of which I would have time to visit....

Inside St. Stephen's portal I stopped for coffee in a small café and made acquaintance of its owner, another Khaled. When I mentioned my plans to visit the Galilee, he offered to have his taxi-driving brother, Issa (*Arabic* for "Jesus") meet me next morning to discuss the trip. Then, along the cobbles of Via Dolorosa, not far from the Gate, I was stopped by one Asad, hovering at the entry of the Sanctuary of the Flagellation and the Condemnation ("Station of the Cross #2")--a site purported to have been that of the ancient Fortress and Tower of Antonia, and the later residence of Pontius Pilate.

I didn't need persuasion to accept Asad's insistence that he escort me *gratis* around the now-monastery, and to walk on original Via Dolorosa stones preserved in its courtyard. If the site *had* been Antonia, there were many ghosts here, and I thought about them as I walked....

Poor Queen Salome Alexandra I!--what a legacy her somewhat despotic husband, King Alexander Jannaeus, left her. Yet, despite Pharisaic strong-arming, Alexandra's nine years of rule from Jerusalem were a golden period, for she took good care of the kingdom, made advances in education, and kept neighboring tyrants at bay. But Time got her. Circa 67 b.c.e., 73 years old and failing, her sons Hyrcanus II and Aristobulus II fought over succession. Hyrcanus being the elder and more compliant, at one point Alexandra, not long before she died, put Aristobulus' wife and children under guard in the tower/"citadel" of Antonia -- "a fortress that joined to the north part of the temple." And wasn't it said, also, that at some point before the turn of that millennium Herod the Great rebuilt Antonia? Finally, circa 45 c.e. (Roman hegemony then heralding the city's fatal end within a couple of decades), Procurator Fadus made the local high priests lay up their holy vestments under Roman control in the "tower of

Antonia”....

Leaving the sanctuary grounds I wasn't surprised when Asad cajoled me across the street to his brother's boutique, where I made a decent deal for an antique bedouin dagger for my husband. From a nearby stall I bought a *ka'ak* (an Arabian bagel--soft bread ring with sesame seed topping) and a fat *falafel* (ground chick peas blended with herbs and spices into a robust patty and deep fried), which I ate while sitting on cool steps in the shade of the street arcade, watching tourists at the entrance to the “Wailing Wall” (a remnant attributed to Herod the Great's rebuilding in 20 b.c.e.).

The Wailing Wall is on the west edge of *Qubbat as-Sakrah*, mount and site of the famous gold-roofed Dome of the Rock. Appetite satisfied, I proceeded the short distance to the wooden walkway that ascends to the Mount, where a guard informed me it would behoove me to queue early. As first in the line, “Allah” decided to bring to stand next to me a man labelable ‘schizophrenic’. He parroted unbrokenly, about sons of Ishmael and Esau and about a father and relatives in New York--that un-mimicable monologue which at once is ‘sense-sounding’ and indecipherable. “You see,” he did say intelligibly, gesturing from his mouth to mine, “I'm not able to speak ‘straight-out’ speech. I have no ‘mother’ tongue. I really don't know what my heritage is.”

It made me *think* about tongues, and their effect on speech, recalling that once—long, long ago—potential crossers of the Jordan from east to west were tested by the word pronunciations. All the while the man's arms shook and his small thin fingers quivered; yet he was tall and of good looks. I tried to be polite. Finally a guard at the gate shouted. “No talk! Your talk is making me crazy!” Yet the man persisted, despite finger to my lips and shake of head as I warningly shifted my eyes toward the guard. I wished I could make myself invisible,

like Eastern mystics say an adept can; mercifully, when I failed to respond further, the man gave me a blessing and left.

I sat myself down on a rock and did work at being invisible, for it seemed the guard was about to move the tightly waiting assembly out into midday sunshine. Four young women surrounded me; the lead, an Israeli from a kibbutz, was showing the sites to the other three, visitors from South Africa and Finland. She was pleased to discover she had fooled me into thinking she, too, was a tourist.

Inevitably the talk turned to politics. “I understand how Palestinians feel, really I do,” she said. “But even if only 100 Jewish descendants remain from antiquity, it’s our god-given land. And I’m afraid there’s going to be a war before it’s over....” She echoed my own fears for the region; and I disliked my unbidden thought, that I knew no other peoples to whom a god had guaranteed land.

“Qubbat Al-Sakhra on Mount Moriah” sits where commonly it widely is accepted both, that upon it once sat the ancient Hebrew temple and that it was the spot from which prophet Muhammad ascended to heaven. I wondered if somewhere beneath lay the threshing floor that King David bought from Araunah/Oman, the Jebusite, leaving son Solomon the task of building a temple. *For weren’t the Jebusites in the “heights;” and didn’t the name, “Jebusi,” date to existence of a regional threshing floor?—*

But then we were admitted and the gold-domed shrine, bright blue mosaic tiling adorning its exterior, arrested speculation. It sits before a central fountain area at the head of that low plateau referred to as the “Noble Sanctuary.” Its interior affects equally all who enter, temporarily rendered thoughtless by the grandeur of size and design, with uplifted heads mesmerized by a complex feast of patterns, colors, and textures that keep the eyes in motion and

the spirit in awe: marble inlays, intricately carved balustrades, and stained glass of artful compositions and hues—all melding together in perfect symmetry. A carved railing encircles the exposed enormous rock of the mount top itself--so strange, such a contrast of raw nature embraced by grandeur....

Across the esplanade, opposite the domed shrine, are the Al Aqsa Mosque and an Islamic museum. Al Aqsa is resplendent also with its interior designs and glittering chandeliers. Like under the Dome, elegant carpets cover the floors. Here, some sections are cordoned for worshipping. I watched women in delicate silk caftans and draped scarves do their prostrations and risings, flawlessly performed no matter the person's age. (As I understand the way things stand now, non-Muslim visitors no longer are allowed inside al-Aqsa?)

A most memorable item at the museum was a four-foot, curved sword with its heavily embroidered hand-woven and brass-fitted sheath, attributed to Asad Allah, a famous Iranian sword maker. Although photographs ordinarily were not allowed in mosques, the museum's custodian permitted me to photograph a lovely stained glass window at back.

In the late afternoon I strolled the east portion of the "Christian" quarter along the arcaded *suq* of Aqabat El Khanga, another bazaar swarming with shops and people. There I found a little cafe that I dubbed "The Nice Lady Cafe" after its owner, who had created a calm dainty oasis of an English tea shop in the middle of commercial bedlam. Along with coffee and a slice of strawberry and cream-filled sponge cake, I enjoyed conversation with an Australian woman--cheery despite being a bit overcome by the hot weather--who had come to visit her husband, an engineer working on a power station under construction in the Gaza strip.

Momentarily lost when I left the shop, I retraced my steps and found I'd taken a wrong turn at what I had thought was a little bistro. I recalled barely glancing in and thinking, *how*

strange to have an alcohol bar in this vicinity. This time I saw a simple sign I previously had missed in the hubbub: *Station of the Cross #7!*--a small, dim chapel-like room; and again I reflected on adjustments it must take for religious pilgrims reverently to trace the “dolorous way,” through oblivious commercial commotion....

I shook off contemplation, availed myself of some dried apricots, and trekked back to my room.

June 4, 9 a.m.... As agreed yesterday (at the café a pebble’s throw from Stephen’s Gate), I met Khader’s brother Issa at the corner of Bab-Hutta and Sha’ar Ha-Arayot, and made arrangements for a northward trip. (*A pretty penny; but strike while the iron’s hot, they say.*)

It being Sunday, it seemed appropriate I make of it a day of relative rest. I ambled slowly to the Jaffa Gate, where “Christian” and “Armenian” quarters meet at the Old City’s west side. I wandered into the Tower of David Museum but quickly was drawn out, and instead paid 14 shekels at the Gate for admittance to stone stairs that take one to the top of the city wall. Walking along the ramparts, north and then northeast, offered a view of all Jerusalem--a dramatic contrast of far-flung modern urban areas with the ancient city’s crowded complex beneath.

Another stairway at the Damascus Gate led me back down. One scheduled aim for the day still was not done, to find out how to locate the box of *Beloved Disciple* books. I decided to return to the hospice to see if the manager had returned but did make note of a neat little café there at the Damascus Gate—a good place for a future breakfast. The Old Quarter, built over uneven terrain, requires more energy to walk than one would expect. El Wad “Street” (or *Ha-Gay* as it’s known in Arabic) begins there in open air, chockfull of produce stands and bread vendors. The stone walkway gradually descends via intermittent steps, giving way to shops of

tinned staples, cheeses, dry goods, and souvenirs--an ever-moving array of colors and sounds. Old women sit on the ground against the walls, selling fresh fig leaves, herbs, and used clothing. I bought two pocket breads, tomatoes, and fruit from the outdoor tables, and a small tin of tuna from a shop, for the day's dinner. I needed to review sites I want to visit on the trip north, catch up on finances, and perhaps write a few postcards.

The hospice manager, however, had not yet returned.....

June 5, 6:30 a.m.... Ready and waiting; my window thrown open to the Via Dolorosa. A group of pilgrims passed below, heads bowed, solemnly singing. Once more I wondered how many centuries would need to pass before certain things depart Collective Consciousness; but I was more preoccupied with the fate of my book, and its case for an *historical* "Yehohshua." I didn't know quite how to accept failure of my plan to leave free copies with Jerusalem bookstores. Then I saw the taxi arrive....

Issa spoke perfect English and Hebrew as well as his parents' tongue. Of 'Arabian Palestinian' descent, he in fact was an Israeli citizen, born in Israel after the Six-Day War; but here identity papers revealed ethnicity. "It's crazy," he said. "Folks of the Jewish religion who emigrate here can become non-distinguished citizens practically overnight." I could tell Issa was hurt; yet he was conciliatory. "Israel acquired the north of Palestine in '48 and the west bank in '67; but the main thing is the here and now. Destiny has placed us together, and the only reasonable thing is to work together for harmony. Neither side cares, really, how the other pays homage to the one God--

"No! The case is not religion!" he continued somewhat emphatically. "Everything has to do with eaking out life--a place for a home, and a job to support one's family. It's not common

knowledge,” Issa concluded, “but a lot of the Arabian population, in and from many places-- Syria, Iraq, Iran, for example--practice Judaism.”

We left the Old City through Stephen’s Gate. I had Issa stop first at a bank in the modern area, where I had a problem with the ATM (words on it all in Hebrew), until I figured out it only gave 600 shekels at a time. I needed to make three extractions to get the 1200 I promised Issa and enough to see me through the rest of the trip. Then Issa headed north on route 60.

Coincidentally, a short distance ahead at Ramallah, Madame Albright and Mr. Arafat coincidentally were meeting in the continuing “peace process.” My thoughts however callously were elsewhere. For a \$25-an-hour fee I was embarking on 12 priceless hours, from Jerusalem in old Judah through Samaria to Galilee and back. I wanted to live it in ancient times, free from current politics....

Ramallah...in a region over which scholars long have debated, as to the apparently immediate anciently scriptural sites of “Ramah” and “Bethel.” What record there was tantalized with possibilities. In the post-Exodus Joshua land allotments, “Ramah”-- a shortened version of Ramathaim-zophim—was “in the hill country of Ephraim,” one of the two half-Egyptian sons born of Asenath (daughter of Egyptian High Priest of On) and Joseph (son of Rachel and Jacob). Ephraim’s allotment, a large central swath of old Canaan bordered on the south by Benjamin, also embraced Bethel, which was to be shared with Benjamin....

And wasn’t Ramah the birthplace of Samuel, protégé of High Priest Eli, the prophet-commander under who power switched from Saul to David? There I was uncertain, but not about prophetess-commander Deborah living “between Ramah and Bethel, in the hills of Ephraim;” that it was there that Nebuchadnezzar assembled captives to take to Babylon; that sons of Ramah returned with repatriations that followed Persia’s Cyrus the Great’s and Darius

I's edicts; and--down to the New Testament!--that Joseph (sympathetic Sanhedrin member who obtained Procurator Pontius Pilate's permission, to remove from the "stave" and provide a tomb for Jesus) was from Arimathaea, the Greek rendition of Ramah....

Ramallah's shops weren't open yet but the town already was alive with traffic. Issa stopped to talk with a Palestinian police *boy*, wearing a dark blue cotton uniform but devoid of police gear except a badge on his hat--an eagle crest in Palestinian colors. "Our policemen wear no arms; under existing agreements the Palestine Authority's not allowed an arsenal," Issa explained.

The 13th day of my mid-east trip and still I lacked comprehension. From a country where race, nationality, and religion were equally-accepted clear-cut elements, I was stymied by the complexities in this relatively miniscule region. Amid my confusions, for example: the term, "Jew" (which came from later Graeco-Romanized "Judaea"--the name of the post-David, southern kingdom of Judah); that all of Arabian descent were not Muslim; that all of Jewish faith were not Hebrew; that Palestinians, Syrians, Jordanians, Egyptians, Saudis, Iraqis and Iranians somehow all were lumped together simply as 'Muslims.' Then there were the far-ranging Bedouins and, among others of Hebrew descent, Poles, Germans, Americans, Russians....

Arabs who practiced Judaism? If so--if Judaism equated with Old Testament "Hebrewism"--could not a practicing Muslim be of ancient Hebrew descent and vice-versa? What was the difference between, a "nation" of race and/or territory, and a "nation" of God? I wondered, too, whether language and "tongue" still was an element as it was in antiquity--shibboleth vs. sippolet; Yaveh vs. Javeh; and, as I noticed yesterday, baklawa vs. baklava?

Issa was right: neither Bible nor Koran could serve as answer. Was it not of record?--that

Moses promised, and Joshua confirmed, Hebron and its environs would belong to descendants of Caleb/Chelubai unto perpetuity? Yet who could say with certainty, from whom Caleb's *mother* descended?

Here in this land of displaced and/or replaced souls, all yearned for the same thing: a reasonable, peaceful life. What human being, irrespective precedent circumstances, could be expected voluntarily to give up his or her established home, no matter when it was established? According to Issa, there were now in such a small territory some 6,000,000 "Jews" and 2,000,000 "Arabs." *What did the Hebrew girl grieve, just two days before at the Dome of the Rock?* "I'm afraid there will be a civil war before it is finished. Maybe a few decades ago there were only a small number of my original people left on the land; but it is very different now...."

It permeates the pores, almost--the Jordan River, the fruit basket of the entire region, now drying up from the great demand for water, its prior full presence manifest only in a narrowing green strip. The ancient names have changed over time. *Old Testament* Canaan became "Palaestina," thanks again to the Greco-Romans. How small the area, in which so much of history sufferingly has occurred....

Very quickly highway 60 from Ramallah took us some 20 or so kilometers, past where Abraham once pitched his tents between Bethel and Ai, and soon to Shiloh in Ephraim territory, where Joshua established the first tabernacle. It was at Shiloh, first long-time home of the Ark, that Joshua made the last tribal apportionments. The tabernacle remained there throughout almost all the three hundred-plus centuries between Joshua and Samuel. After Eli's sons fell before the Philistines, the people exhorted Samuel to consolidate defenses by appointing a king. *Enter Saul, followed by David....*

We passed a turn-off to "Izhar"...*Izhar!—the name of Moses' and Aaron's uncle....*and

arrived at Nablus--ancient *Shechem*—its center tucked at the base of, and its houses climbing up surrounding hills. *This, I mused, was the region where Jacob tented his household as they emigrated south from Haran; where Shechem's king offered a marriage alliance between his prince son and Leah's daughter, Dinah. But Simeon and Levi opposed it and did the Shechemites a severe injustice. Jacob himself said their acts "made his name stink forever"....*

Per Issa, Nablus and Sebaste/Sebastiya--old Samaria City--were incorporated into one by the Palestine Authority...*Samaria City, founded by north King Omri about 875 b.c.e....*

It was in the early-to-mid 900's b.c.e. (if I was recalling correctly) that the north part of the original Davidic kingdom seceded under one Jeroboam, claiming civil rights abuses under Rehoboam (Solomon's son and David's grandson). The territorial split into two smaller kingdoms, "Judah"--south and "Israel"--north, would last almost 400 years for the former, some 250 years for the latter. Samara City had been the North's capital....

Lush agricultural west bank hills rolled by, as Issa educated me about the Qu'ran. "Heaven, it says, is *so very wonderful* it is beyond conception by the human mind. And Hell is a fiery place of unimaginable torments."

"Those also are Christian descriptions," I commented, and asked, "What name does the Qu'ran give to 'Hell?'"

Issa answered a word I neither could pronounce nor spell, but sounded a lot like "jehannan," which put me in mind of *Gehenna* (you know, "Get thee *there!*"). Expositions enough to fill a library have conjectured the meaning and Jesus' symbolic use of it, some translators rendering as "Hell" *Ge'enna*--apparently the Greek name for the narrow Hinnom valley south and southwest of Jerusalem, which biblical accounts strongly suggest as the place for disposing and burning of waste and dead animals. I knew already, as Issa continued, that the

Qu'ran speaks of Jesus, and that Muslims honor him as a prophet. But I *was* surprised to hear that they believe Jesus never died!--that Allah produced an artificial being that looked like Jesus, and it was that which was crucified....

Eleven a.m., past Jenin through country returned to Palestine some several years ago, but not Issa claimed "because of any political process; because the people fought with stones." (Was that following the "First Intifada," I wondered?) "It's crazy," he reiterated, pointing. Left of the road was Israel land; right, a Palestine village. "It's crazy," Issa repeated; but I had no response, feeling the pain of both sides. Instead, seeing a turnoff to "Yezreel," mind was cast back to civil strife of ancient time, for I realized *Jezreel* was nearby. There, Elisha's anointee, Jehu, had ambushed both Ahaziah of the south and Jehoram of the north, and had Jezebel thrown from a balcony to her death....

Issa waved his hands at the passing wheat fields. "All this, from Tiberias down, was occupied in '48," he said, as I spotted a sign for Nain—*Nain, where Jesus went from Capernaum, during one of his preaching tours*. Another dozen miles down the road we entered Nazareth, the location of the reported "Annunciation"--an absolutely beautiful mountain town, clean and cheerful in appearance; but it also was divided into two sections, Hebrew and Palestinian.

I was grateful that it was time for a meal: *schwarma* from a street stand and a great cup of coffee with milk. At the church and shrine of the Annunciation I surveyed the art works under a portico that circles a courtyard garden, wonderful mosaics and paintings from many nations, all depictions of Mary. Inside, a massive interior dome connects to branching stone arches that intersperse brilliant stained glass windows. A mass was in progress, singing and organ music beneath stained glass windows. Steps at one side led down to a grotto shrine, appointed simply

with a table altar where other tourists kneeled in prayer....

It was too much; I had been over-exposed to only one side of the chasm, whereas sympathy was due equally on each side of Caesar's coin. Not that Caesars alone were to blame. The hegemonial waters of all antecedent suzerains and their descendants in the history of the region flooded over me, along with fresh understanding of what had determined that young pacifist known as Jesus--whose maternal blood, alone, in *his* then-temporal history, bestowed a legitimate claim to Herod Antipas' throne. One word from him would have unleashed but another civil war in which, like the entire history already that he knew, would take all toll on the innocent people caught in living vises of power's decisions.

We continued our pass up through the lower Galilee; next stop, Tiberias, a lovely city with a cosmopolitan look. From the harbor we took a boat ride around the 'sea,' really a large lake. After so many arid days it was wonderful to be by and upon the water. I reveled in the stiff breeze over its blue-jade, silvered by large patches of sun. I kept pinching myself. *Was I really on the waters of Lake Chinneroth??*

It wasn't until we were back at the car that I suggested to Issa that we look for Mary Magdalene's home. "Let's start at this village," I pointed to my map, "Migdal."

Issa was mystified. "*Migdal?* There's nothing of interest around there." Nonetheless, he graciously took to the road.

Migdal was a neatly ordered Hebrew settlement, nothing more; but an old man Issa consulted at a corner seemed to know what I wanted. He directed us toward the lake; "but don't take the right path at the fork; stay to the left," he admonished. Issa, uncertain, did first take the right. I didn't say anything but had noticed a small sign at left, leading down, that said, "Magdala Beach." I decided to let Issa find his way.

Coming only upon a fruit-packing shed, Issa queried two workmen who directed us back. Then, a short distance along a rutted dirt road, we came to a compound of sorts--a large site completely surrounded by a chest-high stone wall set with high barbed wire. At center I saw stone ruins of a foundation.

*4 p.m....*I jumped from the car and immediately went to the locked gate—tall, heavy green iron doors painted with gold crosses of the eastern orthodox type. A large dog inside that ran menacingly toward the gate was corralled by the caretaker, a gorgeous young man with crystal-blue eyes embraced by languorous lashes. In the center of the compound, at a small distance, I could see stone ruins of a foundation. Issa interpreted for me....

Indeed, the young man replied, this *was* the house of Mary the Magdalene, purportedly anciently a place of “ill repute.” The Magdalene, he said (seriously, not like it was legend), was so taken by Jesus she left her “lover” (whose name our recounter could not recall) and joined Jesus’ extended family. He finished his tale with the part about, “Let he among you without sin cast the first stone.”

I, stubbornly, am loath to accept historical embellishments! Magdalene tales abound *despite* it academically proven there is nothing of record to sustain any ill repute. The locale, however, a small beach on the east side, in ancient days well could have been an ‘out-of-the-way’ hostel known by Lake fishermen, as were at least two of Jesus’ band....

“The site’s kept closed because it’s dangerous,” Issa continued interpreting, although the site seemed not half as dangerous as others I had visited. “One can enter only with approval of the Bishop of Tiberias,” he finished, “--provided one accepts the risks.” *Ah...bishopric approval? Time would not permit....*

Issa couldn’t get over it, he was that surprised at what my distant research had uncovered.

All the time that he had been in the touring business, he said, and never knowing of the site? I was so taken that my attention was unfocused as we proceeded to visit Tabgha in Capernaum territory, and the Church of the First Feeding of the Multitude. An enshrined rock inside is worshipped as that upon which Jesus laid the loaves and fish. *Was it taken from the hillside?* I wondered.

We skirted the lake south by route 90, then down along the west side of the Jordan, and stopped at Beth Shan/Beit Shean—"Scythopolis" in the time of the Maccabees. One of the largest Decapoli cities, Scythopolis was a junction town on the ancient route from the Mediterranean east to Damascus, a strategic site commanding entrance to the Jezreel valley from the Jordan valley. A relief at Karnak in Egypt celebrates a once capture of Beth Shan by Pharaoh Shishak, and during kings David and Solomon times it was one of 12 royal supply districts. Some 10 miles eastward across the Jordan was site of ancient Jabesh-Gilead, which figured during King Saul's time, victorious Philistines having hung the dead bodies of Saul and his sons on Beth Shan's city wall.

Some 60 kilometers or so past Beth-Shan I saw a sign for "Gilgal" and wondered, *which* Gilgal? But I was at "max," as we worked through another troubled checkpoint, passed a sign "Ma Mixmas" (or something like that--*might that be toward the "ravine of Michmas(h)" where Saul encamped against the Philistines?*). I had to put my pen *away!*

Re-entering Jerusalem's Old City the back way, Issa exclaimed, "Ah! So happy to be back in Jerusalem. I love Jerusalem!"

"You feel about it the way I do about San Francisco, where I was born," I said....

Nine-fifteen the next morning, June 6, the Damascus Gate Cafe was full of patrons at

breakfast, mine being a hearty egg omelet, bread, juice, and coffee. The small open-air cafe at bottom of the rampart steps is raised a bit above the stone pavement, swept clean of the prior day's market hubbub. Merchants were setting out their wares anew while the *muezzin* chanted the mid-morning call.

Before breakfast I had gone to the main post office, outside of Herod's gate, to check on the box of books and was asked to fill out a form, unfortunately all in Hebrew. I set it aside on the café table and watched the shoppers: young mothers, weighed down by all-covering garb, carrying a newborn and leading one or two toddlers by joined hands--somber-faced young women, most in the company of their mother or mother-in-law; but I spied high-heeled shoes under some caftans, and an occasional colored blouse or scarf. I winced a bit from empathetic reminder of my own young womanhood, when there is so much one would like to have, and do....

Above the commerce at the Gate, one sees a tangled maze of antennae on the clusters of roofs beyond. "Terrible," John at Flowers Hotel had lamented. "Now we have cable TV all over the place--22 channels! The children see so much--too much, compared to what parents can give them." Indeed, it had been my observation that television in the mid-east was no different from the west; one saw the "perfect" family--all smiles and in western garb for the most part, touting all the possible comforts of life.

*11:30 a.m....*the Rockefeller Museum--what a collection! Some I'm impelled to note: the "Galilee Man" (uncovered in 1925 in a cave northeast of Lake Tiberias/Sea of Galilee/Lake Chinneroth--the most ancient skull found in the Levant; the only one extant from the Lower Paleolithic period some 300,000 years before the present time); artifacts from a million-year-old lakeshore site in the Jordan Valley; a second century c.e. Nabataean doll, tightly swaddled in the

manner used to protect against scorpion and snake bites; Egyptian alabaster vessels from Ai (the second city taken by Joshua, where in 3000 b.c. a large temple existed on the town's acropolis--the vessels being "some of the oldest and most exquisite of their kind found in Canaan"); finely wrought gold jewelry from treasure hidden by a southern Canaan "City of Hyksos" (where people took refuge around 1550 b.c. from pharaoh Ahmose of Egypt); No. 6 of the Lachish "letters" (a small clay fragment); carved ivories from Megiddo ("attesting to the prosperous Canaanite economy in the shadow of Egyptian rule, and the importance of Megiddo amongst cities of Canaan").

Among the latter items was a box decorated with lions and sphinxes, and an ivory ancient "game board." A limestone pedestal bore names of five Roman legions; and a column bore a Latin inscription about the raising of a statue in honor of Marcus Flavius Agrippa. There were coins of the Seleucid Antiochuses I, VIII, and IX, Demetrius II, and Cleopatra; and shekels of Askelon and Tyre. In a cloister corner, a basalt fragment of a Seti I stele commemorated a military expedition to Canaan. A door lintel found at Beth Shan/Beit Shean was inscribed with a dedication to Ramses III; and a small stele dedicated to the Goddess Anat (consort of Baal), was inscribed, "Anat, Lady of Heaven, Mistress of all Gods" [*shades of Jeremiah!*]....

5 p.m., refreshed and redressed after meditation, nap, and shower, I headed back to the main post office, this time with the post office number of the Patriarchate guest house; and, *lo and behold!* The box was there, but I would need to return in the morning with a release from the hospice, the box's addressee. I then checked on nearby bookstores off the main thoroughfare outside the city wall. The first, an Arabic language store, wasn't interested; the clerk at a second store said the owner "was nervous" about such things. Sharbain's, I was told, probably was my best bet—also nearby, but closed for the day....

June 7, what a hassle.... The still absent manager had taken his rubber signature stamp with him on his trip! The seeming local obsession with rubber stamping reminded me of Kafka; but the clerk finally produced a letter of permission (although it took my threatening rapping on the Bishop's gate next door to spur action).

10:30 a.m. at the post office the box of 60 copies of *Beloved Disciple, Daughter of Logos*, finally was before me. But how was I to *handle* that 40-pound box? Well, I hired a \$5 taxi ride to get it the less than three blocks to Sharbain's, where Lady Luck truly was with me. The owner said that the store, being "Christian," was the only one likely to accept the books. She gracefully agreed to distribute them free as I requested and keep me posted. (Privately in the book-placing process, I had been forced to ruminate again how impossible it appears to be, for persons to grasp that *Beloved Disciple* is *not* about the man called "Jesus" *as a god*, but the tale simply of an *historical* man confronting the politics and circumstances of his time. Even my blessed mother, may she truly be resting in peace, told someone I had written a "religious" book!)

Spending money was getting exhausting, but fear for my film through the airport x-rays caused me to hoof it a VERY long way until I found an ATM that accepted my card; and I withdrew another 400 shekels to have enough to pay for having the films developed that very afternoon. Later, finishing journal notes at the Jerusalem Star over a much needed supper (one-half broiled chicken, salad, and fries), it was good to *eat* as it would be (with a nod to Mel Brooks) to be *queen*. Afterward I retrieved the developed photos but would not take time to look them over until I was on the plane. Issa was to come for me in the middle of the night, to take me to the Ben Gurion airport at Tel Aviv....

Issa was prompt; the drive to Tel Aviv, only 40 minutes, little traffic under a clear night sky. The airport at 6:05 a.m., however, was another story. Security checks were triple-fold, and

I was interrogated some 15 minutes about places I had visited and why. The gift dagger in my duffel bag caused a little concern, but I was allowed to carry it. *Not so easy at Milan's Malpensa Airport!*--where I had only a little time for the 10:10 connecting flight. The Italians made such a fuss! (But I'm Italian, too, I told them!) Finally they wrapped it in a separate box to send to the plane's baggage compartment, for me to retrieve at San Francisco. I had little belief, but that small box was the last item to drop onto the carousel queue. I hoped JC would like it....

(He did. And, come September of that year 2000, I blessed Providence that my journey had been timed before the *second* Intifada....)

* * *

References: *History of the Daughters* (link at this domain), and much appreciation and thanks to *Wikipedia*, for some detailing.