

## REFLECTIONS ON THE 2006 MIDDLE EAST TRAVEL SEMINAR

Tony Rocco Hepp  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

I am very thankful to the Lord for having blessed me with the privilege of participating in the Middle East Travel Seminar. The professor who nominated me, a 1996 METS participant, said it would be the trip of a lifetime. He was right! Many thanks to the three foundations, trip organizers, and especially Steve McKenzie for donating so much money, time, and talent to me and my tripmates. My thoughts below are loosely organized by subject; the section headings serve only as a general guide.

### Sites and Sounds

“When He [Jesus] approached Jerusalem, He saw the city and wept over it, saying, ‘If you had known in this day, even you, the things which make for peace! But now they have been hidden from your eyes. For the days will come upon you when your enemies will throw up a barricade against you, and surround you and hem you in on every side, and they will level you to the ground and your children within you, and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation.’”<sup>1</sup> To a much lesser degree, my heart also broke as I beheld old Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives. Once a place where the *shekinah* glory of the Lord was manifested, it is now by and large a spiritual wasteland. The hearts and minds of those who presently dwell there have been taken “captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.”<sup>2</sup> I enjoyed seeing awesome sites such as the room where Jerome wrote the Vulgate, the area where Stephen was stoned, and the Areopagus. But I could not help seeing the vast amount of misguided religiosity throughout the trip. Learning that 95% of the Jews in Israel are secular was also depressing. The people group which was entrusted with the oracles of Yahweh for thousands of years has almost entirely forsaken them. May this be a reminder that ethnicity and history have nothing to do with God making himself known and cherished.

Snorkeling was one of many things that I experienced for the first time on the METS. After walking over eight miles at Petra, Jordan, and getting only a few hours of sleep before ascending Mount Sinai in Egypt, floating around the Gulf of Aqaba was much needed. It was such a refreshing, enjoyable time. Not having brought my own mask and snorkel, Lane Winn graciously loaned her equipment to me (and Daniel Felts) for the evening. As we stood on the beach looking out across the sea, I told Daniel and my roommate, Greg, that Psalm 19 was running through my head the whole time I beheld the amazing variety of life teeming in the water and on the sea floor. In spite of the fallenness of man and the corruption of creation, the wonder of God is still so evident in his created order. How merciful he is to bless both sinner and saint with such amazing manifestations of his glory.

---

<sup>1</sup>Luke 19:41-44, NASB

<sup>2</sup>Colossians 2:8, NASB

Though my saddle was all jacked-up, riding a camel up Mount Sinai under a full blanket of shimmering stars was awesome. The dark, quiet,<sup>3</sup> exotic atmosphere made the ride seem somewhat mystical. A few times I imagined what the area would have looked like with hundreds of thousands of Israelites awaiting Moses' descent. Watching the sun rise at approximately 5:50 a.m. was no less than majestic. Shortly thereafter, my soul soared as I heard "How Great Thou Art" being sung by a large group of Asian Christians behind us. "Great is Yahweh, and highly to be praised, and His greatness is unsearchable."<sup>4</sup> Amen!

I was initially surprised at the number of similarities between the biblical record and the beliefs and practices of the ancient pagans of the Middle East. We saw or heard about special temple areas called the "holy of holies" which were built or placed out of the common person's sight, temples which served as the dwelling place of the a god or gods, sacrificial systems, sacerdotalism, and creation accounts. Given what Yahweh has told us in his word, these parallels make perfect sense. Being created by God, all persons possess or contain the *sensus divinitatis*, as John Calvin said. And as the apostle Paul said, everyone knows Yahweh, not a general impression of a god. Though it is often twisted and perverted due to the conditions of men's hearts, the knowledge of Yahweh that sinners suppress often comes to expression in forms that contain elements of the truth and the proper way men are to worship him. Fascinating!

### **Tripmate Interaction**

During one of our evenings in Israel, Don Murphy led us in a time of reflection and sharing. It was time well spent. A few persons described their feelings at the various "holy" sites which we had visited. One of the comments I shared that night was that I considered none of the sites to be holy. Instead, the fruitful dialogues with my tripmates were the holy things since they were "set apart" for deliberations about Yahweh, who alone is holy. "Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship you, for your righteous acts have been revealed."<sup>5</sup> I also shared a truth that I tried to keep in mind throughout the trip: all human beings are Yahweh's image bearers since each human being is his special creation. This further led me to consider the good conversations as holy, knowing that they involved one of my King's image bearers, regardless of their spiritual state.<sup>6</sup>

"A fool does not delight in understanding but only in revealing his own mind."<sup>7</sup> My greatest disappointment of the trip was the lack of biblical facility on the part of almost all the other participants. Seldom were theological beliefs grounded with thorough, coherent biblical exegesis. When the Bible was called on to support a doctrinal claim, random prooftexts which rarely had anything to do with the point at hand were cited. Emotion, modern cultural consensus, and/or denominational authority supplanted the Bible as the basis of "Christian" belief. I lost track of the number of times I heard, "Well I think . . ." or "My church tradition

---

<sup>3</sup>Caren Fog and I got separated from the rest of the team.

<sup>4</sup>Psalms 145:3, NASB

<sup>5</sup>Revelation 15:4, ESV

<sup>6</sup>This in no way means that all persons in the world are sons or daughters of Yahweh. Only those who believe/trust in the one, true and living God—Yahweh—are acceptable to him and will avert his just, eternal wrath on the day of judgment. See Genesis 15:6; John 6:26-65; Romans 4:1-17; 5:9; Galatians 3.

<sup>7</sup>Proverbs 18:2, NASB

teaches . . .” or “My school teaches . . .” Does it really matter what an individual sinner or collection of sinners teaches about God? Who besides God can speak for God? If we ever hope to avoid complete skepticism in this life, including knowledge of our own existence, subjectivism must be eschewed. To be sure the “community of faith” is often helpful in fine-tuning biblical doctrine. But is biblical hermeneutics so difficult that man cannot be sure of any purported meaning in the Bible?<sup>8</sup> I am always struck by the audacity and utter inconsistency of those who *claim* that no form of communication (e.g., literature or speech) is sufficient to convey an unambiguous assertion or claim. Yet these same persons write books and give lectures, acting as if they can do the very thing they say cannot be done. If their *claim* were true, there would be no point in claiming it since the reasonableness of the claim itself requires it to be false. The intelligibility of talking and writing demands that these communication forms be sufficient to convey that which the author intended; otherwise the very point of talking and writing is rendered vain and irrational. Known, absolute truth may only be denied by those who also admit to being a walking contradiction. And if this be admitted, the relativist should cease talking altogether for their talking is non-sensical. It betrays their stated suppositions. Seeking an escape from this fact of life, one tripmate said he was “comfortable with absurdity” and the violation of the law of non-contradiction. But as I told him in various ways, he could not possibly be speaking the truth or even what he believed to be true for to reject the law of non-contradiction means you simultaneously accept it.

Knowledge of God, whose mind has been partially revealed in his word, is inescapable and necessary to live in his world. It is no wonder why Paul told the Romans that “the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because *that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them* [emphasis mine]. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.”<sup>9</sup>

Christians need to realize there is a history behind the writings of empiricists like David Hume and skeptics like Bertrand Russell. Yahweh, according to the Bible, has revealed himself in the Bible. No one authorized him to do that. As God he is his own authority. He is self-authorizing. No one, therefore, has the right to speak for him, hence the reason he revealed himself. With God in the dock and man (or a collection of persons) on the throne, Christianity always devolves to subjectivism, which always ends in skepticism. And Christians wonder why the Church is impotent in our day, lacking any power to upset the wicked and perverse world in which it lives.<sup>10</sup> May the Lord give us humility to submit to the main and plain teachings of his word as we wrestle to understand the relatively few things that are difficult.

Borrowing from the words of Isaiah, I often sensed the following attitude in many of my tripmates. “You felt secure in your wickedness and said, ‘*No one sees me,*’ your wisdom and your knowledge, they have deluded you; for you have said in your heart, ‘*I am, and there is no*

---

<sup>8</sup>One person on the trip told me that we cannot be sure how sinners and Yahweh are reconciled. Sad.

<sup>9</sup>Romans 1:18-23, NASB

<sup>10</sup>See Acts 17:6 and Philippians 2:15.

*one besides me* [emphasis mine].”<sup>11</sup> Though God tells us in his word “You shall not put Yahweh your God to the test, as you tested Him at Massah,”<sup>12</sup> putting him in the dock was standard protocol when an archaeological find seemed to conflict with the Bible. Enlightenment-era thinking is alive and well in our postmodern age. “That scriptural account can be doubted. It doesn’t square with Dr. Soandso’s findings.” Denial of the Bible has always been the road taken by the lazy “Christian” epistemologist, when the fundamentals of his or her worldview were challenged. May God grant us the ability to put ourselves in the dock, where we belong.

Steve McKenzie admitted to an incredibly significant philosophical point at one site. “Archaeology has to be interpreted just like anything else.” Opinions as to what an ancient site tells man are as varied as the worldviews of those who examine it. Why then was there so much sitting in judgment over the Bible on the basis of tenuous, theory-laden archaeological data? Though all the students on the trip claimed to be Christians, almost all of them (in practice) presupposed the truthfulness of something other than the Bible when seeking to know the truth; archaeology tended to sit on the throne of men’s hearts. Sandra, our Greece tour guide, captured the futility of relying on 4000-year-old ruins to justify any knowledge claim. She said, “You come back [to Greece] and I will tell you something different based on archaeological evidence.” Naturalists love the scientific method even though historiography and archaeology are not subject to it! Their epistemological golden calf, therefore, is of no value for knowing anything historical. Antibiblical worldviews like naturalism provide no certain answers to any questions and, in the end, lead to total ignorance *in principle*. “The fool has said in his heart, ‘There is no God.’”<sup>13</sup> Reject Yahweh; become a fool.

We were told that archaeologists have found no evidence that people existed in Arad when Joshua conquered it.<sup>14</sup> What then do we make of the biblical account? At crossroads like this, Christians have to ask, “Who or what is my *final* authority for that which I believe about reality—the interpretations of pagan archaeologists or the Bible?” Or “Is my epistemological foundation empiricism or revelation?” If one *seems to be* in conflict with the other, both cannot be one’s *final* authority. The answer is easy if one is a Christian. The Bible always trumps all other would-be sources of knowledge, *if* Jesus really is one’s Lord. Does this mean that Christians are fideists or obscurantists? No more than naturalistic empiricists. Everyone’s ultimate assumptions about reality, how man knows what he knows, and how he is to behave in this world are held by “faith.” Without presenting a full-blown presentation of revelational epistemology, I can only here assert that biblical faith is the only faith which provides the preconditions for the intelligibility of any aspect of human experience. In short, only God’s word enables God’s image bearers to make sense of the world and have justified, true belief (knowledge) of anything at all.<sup>15</sup>

Along with imprecise language when talking about worldview-level issues, many expressions and statements made throughout the trip revealed great philosophical naiveté. One person used “modern realities versus religious ideologies” in a statement. He should have known that what constitutes reality is itself determined by one’s ultimate worldview

---

<sup>11</sup>Isaiah 47:10, NASB

<sup>12</sup>Deuteronomy 6:16, NASB

<sup>13</sup>Psalms 14:1, NASB

<sup>14</sup>See Joshua 12:14.

<sup>15</sup>Upon critical analysis, the Bible alone provides the preconditions for that which makes the scientific enterprise reasonable. See *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* by Cornelius Van Til.

commitments, i.e., one's religious ideology. Muddled thinking is unacceptable for the man or woman who is training to be a teacher of God's word.<sup>16</sup>

Most of my tripmates seemed comfortable with disparities between the conclusions of some scientists and the biblical record. I sensed a cowardly capitulation to the dogma of pagan professors regardless of the evangelical explanations that exist. Could this disposition stem from an unspoken love for uncertainty? I think so. Ambiguity, confusion, uncertainty, and doubt is the devil's handiwork. What did Satan tempt Eve to do? Doubt God. "Has God said?" Doubt enables man to retain his professed autonomy. And if he can convince himself that he is autonomous, he can be the determiner of truth; he can determine how he will live and what he will worship. Autonomy and Yahweh are mutually exclusive, hence man's love for anything that undergirds the former (e.g., naturalistic science).

Recently, I read the following statement by a Christian missionary to Muslims. "In reality, the overwhelming majority of Muslims know little or nothing of the Bible. Many are not even aware that the Qur'anic term *injl* refers to the gospel of the New Testament."<sup>17</sup> To this could be added the all-important teaching of the Qur'an that Muslims must submit to the prior revelation of Moses, David, and Jesus. This reminded me of an occasion on the trip when I sought to inform a young Muslim boy named Mohammed about the frequent mention of Jesus in his holy book. I asked the boy, "Have you ever heard of Jesus?" My inquiry led to perhaps the greatest display of immaturity, ignorance, and arrogance that I have ever seen. Wrongly assuming what I planned to say to Mohammed after answering my question, I was rudely censured by one of my tripmates. Her disapproval of my question was a manifestation of an unspoken trip rule—only seek to learn, not inform, let alone evangelize. Mohammed was so offended by the way this young girl commanded me to stop talking to him about *one of his own prophets* that he asked me if she was my wife or sister! He explained to me that no one else, in his mind, would ever so disrespectfully speak to a man. Later that day, I tried to explain to my tripmate how she had greatly offended Mohammed and me. Her response and attitude was typical of professed Christians who claim to be tolerant of other viewpoints. She was interested in sharing her thoughts on what had transpired but not in hearing my rationale for speaking as I did to Mohammed. Again, "A fool does not delight in understanding but only in revealing his own mind."<sup>18</sup> It should have been obvious that day that one of the ways that a person learns (and teaches) is by asking questions of those who do not share the same worldview, hence my reason for posing my question to Mohammed. What are young Muslims taught about Jesus? Do Muslim youth know anything about the Injl? I desired answers to these questions. All of my tripmates apparently did not.

Interpersonal skills are a must in life. They are essential in any form of Christian ministry. Due to the social effects of the Fall, strife and dissension among human relationships are almost unavoidable. This is one of many facts that makes me long for heaven. In the meantime, however, I and any other Christian who wishes to honor the will of the Lord Jesus Christ must learn to vigorously debate and seek resolution to theological matters (and everything ultimately is theological in nature) while reflecting the character of the one whom we profess to be the Lord

---

<sup>16</sup>See 1 Peter 3:15 and Titus 1:9.

<sup>17</sup>*Missiology: An Introduction to the Foundations, History, and Strategies of World Missions*, 382. Though Muslims reject all parts of the Gospels which contradict the Qur'an.

<sup>18</sup>Proverbs 18:2, NASB

of our lives, including our behavior. Most of the discussions in which I participated were formative and thereby fruitful. Being called on to give an account for the hope that is in me with gentleness and reverence (1 Pet 3:15) further shaped me for the area of Christian service to which I believe God has called me. I thoroughly appreciate those members of my team who were willing to challenge and be challenged for the sake of Truth (John 14:6). May God grant repentance to any professed Christian who has embraced Christian relativism, a gross contradiction in terms.

At times I was surprised at the level of intolerance displayed on the part of those who *claimed* to be champions of it. En route to the temple mount, we were told that cars driven in certain areas of Jerusalem on the Jewish Sabbath may be pelted with stones. One tripmate sarcastically quipped, “Yet another kind thing done in the name of religion.” With tongue in cheek, I politely reminded the person that we must not judge those who express their beliefs differently than we. To paraphrase Fyodor Dostoyevsky, without God having spoken an ethical standard to which men must subscribe, all things are permissible. No one would have the right or authority to evaluate another’s actions. Nor would entire societies have the right or authority to judge another for entire societies are simply collections of individuals. What is and is not “kind” would be totally arbitrary. Note the incongruence of my pontificating that no one has the right to judge another *if* there is no absolute truth!<sup>19</sup> Having revealed himself clearly in the Bible, God has made absolute moral certitude an inescapable fact. Any expression of anti-Christian thought assumes Christianity to be coherent. Borrowing from the apostle Paul, “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!”<sup>20</sup>

Praying with my roommate and a couple others on the trip was a refreshing blessing. The heart of a person often comes out in prayer. I was also blessed by being able to admit my own sins as well as hear the confessions of others. Confession of one’s sins to Yahweh truly is the road to healing.

### **Politics**

The level of hospitality showed by nationals who were not affiliated with or paid any money by anyone from the METS was a pleasant surprise. Upon returning to the States, several Americans asked if I felt endangered during the trip. Never did I feel this way. In fact I told them that I felt the opposite—safe, secure, and welcomed by the nationals of each country. Even nationals who had nothing to gain by my presence (e.g., a Jordanian border patrol officer) were friendly and courteous to me as we discussed everything from culture to America’s foreign policy to beliefs about Yahweh.

While in Palmyra, I will never forget meeting a nice lady named Halla and her family. I met them while tooling around a model of a traditional Bedouin tent. She, her parents, sisters, and others were seated on benches along the inside perimeter of the tent as they smoked a “hubbly bubbly” and drank hot tea. I said hello to them and asked if I could photograph them. The father permitted me and then invited me to sit between him and his daughter, gave me my own glass of tea, and offered me one of the hubbly bubbly tubes. What a guy! We enjoyed a

---

<sup>19</sup>Truth that is universal and invariant

<sup>20</sup>Romans 11:36, NASB

brief chat before I had to board the tour bus. This account is just one of many in which the common grace of God in the people there was evident. It is deplorable that most Americans (who get their ideas of the Middle East solely from one of the many ultra biased media companies), even those who profess to be Christians, have such animosity towards citizens of the Middle East. The METS has helped me acquire a more accurate assessment of the other line of Abraham's seed<sup>21</sup> and the nations which we toured.

Due to the repetitive, patient instruction of Steve McKenzie and Peter Sabella, our Israel tour guide, my knowledge of 20<sup>th</sup> century Middle Eastern political history is *much* greater now. Terms such as Palestinian, Arab, settlement, occupied territory, and West Bank now make sense. I feel much more able to cast an intelligent opinion about the situation involving Israel, the Palestinians, and the surrounding nations.

### **Biblical Infidelity**

It seems that the METS is an effort on the part of its sponsors, organizers, and volunteers (perhaps unconsciously in the case of some) to promote pluralism. All of us heard about and saw elements of many worldviews during our travels, for example: Baal worship, early Yahweh worship, Greek mythology,<sup>22</sup> later Yahweh worship (Judaism), even later Yahweh worship (Christianity), Islam, Roman Catholicism, Secularism, Agnosticism, and Hedonism. Yet, there were *little to no pronouncements* regarding the veracity of one worldview versus another. This is characteristic of pluralism, an ideology which says that all worldviews/religions are true and as equally effective at providing liberation, freedom, and salvation (if this last notion is applicable). No one, pluralists maintain, may claim "religious" supremacy over another. Even on its own terms, pluralism has been shown time and time again to be a self-referential absurdity and a religion in its own right.<sup>23</sup> The handful of worldview-critical remarks that were voiced seemed to be reserved for those who believe the Bible to be the inerrant, infallible, complete, and final word of the one true and living God.<sup>24</sup> Could this be that historic Christianity in its councils, creeds, and confessions has always been exclusivistic and "narrow-minded" according to today's relativists?

Know therefore today, and take it to your heart, that Yahweh, He is God in heaven above and on the earth below; there is no other. (Deut 4:39, NASB)

O Yahweh, there is none like You, nor is there any God besides You, according to all that we have heard with our ears. (1 Chron 17:20, NASB)

I am Yahweh, and there is no other; besides Me there is no God. I will gird you, though you have not known Me; that men may know from the rising to the setting of the sun that there is no one besides Me. I am Yahweh, and there is no other, the One forming light and creating darkness, causing well-being and creating calamity; I am Yahweh who does all these. (Isa 45:5-7, NASB)

---

<sup>21</sup>For all my dispensationalist friends. He he.

<sup>22</sup>The primary definition of "myth" is the sense in which I am here using "mythology."

<sup>23</sup>See *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith & Mission* by Harold Netland or *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* by Ron Nash.

<sup>24</sup>E.g., "In 1972 conservative Christians tried to burn down the Al Aqsa mosque."

Jesus answered, “The foremost is, ‘HEAR, O ISRAEL! THE LORD OUR GOD IS ONE LORD; AND YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND, AND WITH ALL YOUR STRENGTH.’ The second is this, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” The scribe said to Him, “Right, Teacher; You have truly stated that ‘HE IS ONE, AND THERE IS NO ONE ELSE BESIDES HIM; AND TO LOVE HIM WITH ALL THE HEART AND WITH ALL THE UNDERSTANDING AND WITH ALL THE STRENGTH, AND TO LOVE ONE’S NEIGHBOR AS HIMSELF,’ is much more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.” (Mark 12:29-33, NASB)

He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him. (John 3:36, NASB)

Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6, ESV)

And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved. (Acts 4:12, NASB)

For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus. (1 Tim 2:5, NASB)

Given the Bible’s clarity and repetitiveness on this point of doctrine, it is no wonder why pluralists and inclusivists, regardless of the title they take,<sup>25</sup> violate their *stated* presupposition of worldview equality.<sup>26</sup>

By the end of the trip, hearing labels like “fanatic,” “fundamentalist,” and “religious radical” became almost humorous. Who isn’t a “fanatic,” “fundamentalist,” and “religious radical”? No one. These terms, along with “liberal” and “conservative,” are unhelpful and serve only to skirt the real issue that divides two persons or cultures. That issue is God. Since the Fall, Yahweh has sovereignly imposed the existence of enmity between the seed of Satan and the seed of the Savior. “And I [Yahweh] will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel.”<sup>27</sup> And since the Fall, sinners have strived to blur, erase, or rename that enmity. Why in almost all cases do sinners disagree, argue, and wage war? Because one is a God-lover and the other is a God-hater. This truth is replete in Scripture.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup>E.g., most liberation theologians, moralists, secular humanists, atheists, mystics

<sup>26</sup>Epistemically and/or morally speaking

<sup>27</sup>Genesis 3:15, NASB. Emphasis in the Hebrew text is placed on enmity.

<sup>28</sup>See Exodus 20:5; Deuteronomy 7:10; Matthew 6:24; Romans 8:7.

## Regrets

The last so-called worship service in which we participated (in Greece) was a sad example of genuine Christian worship. As I reflected on what was said, not said, and done, I am sure the Holy Spirit was grieved. In particular I fear he was grieved by my failure to preach the word. Physical and mental fatigue certainly contributed to the discombobulation I felt that evening. Due to several discussions which I had had on the trip, I also sensed an unwillingness in my hearers to receive “Thus sayeth the Lord” proclamation. But even if my sense were correct, I should not have shrunk back from declaring what needed to be said.<sup>29</sup> Some present were not trusting in the person and work of Jesus Christ alone for the forgiveness of their sins. Thus the wrath of God abided on them (and still does unless God has chosen to grant them saving faith and repentance; see Ephesians 2:8-9 and 2 Timothy 2:24-26). Knowing an eternal hell<sup>30</sup> awaits them should have compelled me to articulate more clearly the basic New Testament teaching that there is salvation in no one except Jesus Christ; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which sinners must be saved.<sup>31</sup>

I and another seminary student volunteered to lead the service. I was grateful for the opportunity to work with her but should have realized that our time constraints and what was more-or-less expected from us was not conducive for what needed to take place. The heart of biblical, God-honoring corporate worship is the preaching of God’s word. Worship without genuine Spirit-empowered preaching is like a man without a soul—dead. It is something other than worship of the King of kings and Lord of lords.

One afternoon in Israel, we visited the seaport city of Caesarea. Continuing our normal practice, we read a relevant portion of the New Testament. Peter selected Acts 10 for us. I volunteered to read. After I finished, he proceeded to give a bit of commentary on the chapter. He repeated the apostle Peter’s words in verse 34—“I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality”—and then stated that Jesus came for all nations. This served as his springboard to advocate the heresy called inclusivism. He asked a rhetorical question. “Do we really think that sincere Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims will go to hell?” It became apparent that Peter was not just a tour guide for METS. He was a false-gospel preacher. I sorely regret not having answered “Yes” to his question for this is how the Bible answers his question over and over and over. It does so because God knew of man’s tendency to play God, to usurp his sovereign prerogative in saving some sinners and hardening the rest. “That’s not fair!” is the inclusivist’s battle cry. Praise God he has chosen not to be fair to all persons, lest everyone spend a deserved eternity in hell. Praise God that he has given to some sinners that which they in no way deserved or desired—saving grace!

Peter had a theologically motivated agenda in the reading of Acts 10. The two instances of “Caesarea” were peripheral to his cause. His prostitution of the text was the most egregious example of prooftexting that I have ever heard or read. The next ten verses of the same chapter soundly refute the notion of inclusivism as belief in Jesus is declared to be the sole means by which sins are forgiven. “The man who fears Him and does what is right, is welcome to Him.”<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup>Cf. Acts 20:27.

<sup>30</sup>See Matthew 8:12; 13:41-42; 22:1-14; 25:41-46; Mark 9:47-48; Luke 16:22-24.

<sup>31</sup>See Acts 4:12.

<sup>32</sup>Acts 10:35b, NASB

Peace with God comes “through Jesus Christ (He is Lord of all).”<sup>33</sup> Jesus “is the One who has been appointed by God as Judge of the living and the dead. Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name *everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins* [emphasis mine].”<sup>34</sup> God is certainly inclusivistic. He has chosen sinners “from every tribe and tongue and people and nation” to be saved.<sup>35</sup> But he will not set aside his own standard of communion with him—perfect righteousness—in order for more sinners to avert the wrath which they are due. No, those sinners who desire to know, love, and enjoy God forever must wholly trust in the person and work of his only begotten Son.

### Miscellaneous Thoughts

A biased, lawyer-like presentation of Islam’s militant history relative to that of the Crusades was glaringly obvious. Not once did I hear a negative comment (even in private) about Islam and the river of blood that it has let *and continues to let* by slaughtering millions of non-Muslims who chose not to convert to the so-called religion of peace. Wonder why? Perhaps doing so would have appeared intolerant, and we all know that is taboo.

Bible-believing Christians have long since recognized and admitted to the immoral, God-dishonoring nature of the Crusades. But let us not disparage true Christianity because of the sinful behavior of those who *professed* to be Christians, i.e., the crusader army leaders. Taken as a whole, no biblical evidence whatsoever exists to justify militant “evangelism” or vengeance. On the other hand, a slew of Qur’anic passages command the slaughter of non-Muslims, provided they have first been offered the way of Islam.<sup>36</sup>

Why did the Crusades occur anyway? Lust for land? Lust for money? Theological motivation? In the words of Peter Akinola, Anglican archbishop of the Christian Association of Nigeria, we “forget, in the West, that the Crusades were a *response* [emphasis mine] to 400 years of Islamic aggression in Europe. Don’t you ever forget that. They didn’t just happen for the fun of it.”<sup>37</sup> This statement comes from a man who is currently witnessing the wonderful fruit of Islam—violence and oppression—among his own people.

Certain words of the apostle Paul to the early Christians in Rome played in my head throughout the trip and do now as well. “Brethren, my heart’s desire and my prayer to God for them is for their [ethnic Jews] salvation. For I testify about them that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. For not knowing about God’s righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.”<sup>38</sup> I so praise the Lord that he made the way by which sinful human beings and himself may be reconciled—faith alone in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ alone. Justification by faith alone in Christ alone—what a glorious, joy-evoking truth! Though ecstatic at the saving work that God has already done for all who have or will believe in him, my heart breaks as I reflect on the many, many wayward unbelievers whom I saw throughout the three weeks. Seeing so many idolatrous

---

<sup>33</sup>Acts 10:36b, NASB

<sup>34</sup>Acts 10:42b-43, NASB

<sup>35</sup>See Revelation 5:9.

<sup>36</sup>See surah 2:190-193, 216, 244; 4:89; 8:13-17; 9:5, 29, 57.

<sup>37</sup>Collin Hansen and Peter Akinola, “Q+A,” *Christianity Today*, May 2006, 23.

<sup>38</sup>Romans 10:1-4, NASB

persons suck on “broken cisterns that can hold no water” (Jer 2:13) as they worship a god to suit their sins renewed in me a passion to see the gospel of God taken to all the peoples of the world so that Jesus Christ may receive the worship and honor that he alone is due. May the Lord again send forth his word “unhindered” (Acts 28:31) so all the nations may experience the joy and satisfaction of loving him who created them.

Seeing the vast number of lost persons throughout the trip, especially those who named the name of Jesus as their Lord and savior yet espoused atheism with the same mouth (yes, this happened), has invigorated me to fervently ask God to send missionaries to the Middle East. Seeing so many garden-variety pagans, Muslims, and Jews spurred me to think and pray more about evangelism in the “holy land.” May Yahweh be pleased to deliver the inhabitants of the Middle East “from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God” (Acts 26:18, NASB).

At one point during the trip, a student referred to the nations which we were visiting as “the light of the world,” alluding to Jesus’ words in Matthew 5:14. What? Those who have not embraced the kingdom of God as Jesus defined it (through Matthew and the other Gospel authors) are *not* the light of the world. If the Lord Jesus is cited, it should be done in context. God himself is light (1 John 1:5) and only those who have been made a partaker of his divine nature (1 Peter 1) may be considered to be light in this world. “A person is either in a state of lostness or in a state of salvation (Rom. 10:9, 10), condemned or free (John 3:18), in *darkness or in light* [emphasis mine] (John 8:12), in the life of Adam or in the life of Christ (1 Cor. 15:22), ruled by sin or ruled by righteousness (Rom. 6:19).”<sup>39</sup> May Yahweh keep his sheep from replacing his gospel of eternal salvation from sins (Matt 1:21; Luke 19:10) with temporary salvation from economic, political, and sociological oppression.

---

<sup>39</sup>*Missiology*, 133.