



### The Lonely Tel

The wind swept across the dirt-packed hill, keening through the alleys and around corners of toppled stone walls – all that remained of a once great and ancient city.

I pressed my hat firmly to my head as Erin and I strained to hear Rev. Dr. Zelt over the dry howl as he unpacked the biblical history of the day's final stop. I could feel my attention slipping - a victim of the late hour, hot sun, and interminable wind – as Zelt referenced scripture after scripture relating to the scriptural accounts of this hill, or 'tel' in Hebrew (1 Kings 19:3; 1 Samuel 8:2; Genesis 26:23-33 and 28:10-15).

As names like Isaac, Jacob, Samuel, and Elijah strode like ghostly apparitions through my brain, my eyes drifted from Zelt's ruddy face to the structure five feet in front of me – an old stone well – its limestone walls bleached white in the sun's glare.



The well at Tel Be'er Sheva.

As I considered it, a small bird landed on the stone lip – a moment's rest beneath the shade of the wooden canopy that sheltered the cool waters deep below.

“As you know, Abraham had many herds and flocks,” said Zelt as I watched the bird bob and dip. “You can imagine that with all those thirsty mouths, a consistent source of water would be important. And so Abraham and his servants dug a well - that well right in front of you. We know that's his well because it's the only one we've found at Be'er Sheva.”

With that, Zelt paused, letting those final words stand like limestone bricks on an ancient hill.

### Israel: The Land Between

Over the last two weeks of May and the first week of June, Erin and I spent a jam-packed sixteen days touring the biblical sites of ancient Israel. This trip, funded by the generous saints at Prince of Peace - Fremont, and part of Concordia Seminary's curriculum, was something Erin and I had been trying to do ever since our first attempt in 2020 got canceled by COVID-19.

Our experience of Israel, including everything from geography to geology, fundamentally changed how we understand Scripture. God's Story became more than just a story. The words of Scripture became a living and breathing account of real history about real people who lived in real places – places you can see, smell, and touch today. More than that, the connections between the Old Testament and the New came alive with a startling vitality as Dr. Zelt would bring us to tel after tel and sweep us through 6,000+ years of narrative history as his finger traced along the horizon.

Erin and I shared countless special moments in Israel, like seeing a synagogue where Jesus preached in Magdala, the road to Emmaus, and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, which marks the site of His empty tomb. But that mic-drop moment on the top of Tel Be'er Sheva is one I find myself replaying repeatedly.

I think it's for this reason. You see, when Abraham dug his well, he did so because he had journeyed to that land in light of God's promises – that his people would become as numerous as the stars in the sky and that out of his lineage would come one who would be a blessing to all the nations. Abraham's well marks the earliest moment in the Bible when we can tie a physical place, even a structure, to the unfolding of God's fulfillment of these promises. And yet God's time is not like our time. Abraham lived his whole life, listening to the wind blow through his tents on the top of that tel, and never saw its final fulfillment.



Group photo on top of Mt. Gamla.

In fact, over 2,000 years went by before one of Abraham's ever-so-great Grandson and His family rushed by that tel on a donkey, seeking shelter in Egypt. 2,000+ years for that little boy to become the man who would finally possess the gates of the enemy on the cross (Genesis 22:17).

A little under 2,000 years after that, I was born in a big town in West Africa. I was baptized, grafted into Abraham's family, and marked by those ancient promises. I lived an endlessly sinful life but received equally endless forgiveness. And one day, I went to Israel to see the well my ever-so-great grandfather dug there. To sit on the hill where he sat and listen to the wind that's still blowing. To realize more thoroughly than I ever had before, that 2,000 years is no time to wait for a promise.

I never saw the boy in the manger. I never saw Him riding to Egypt on the donkey. I never saw the marks on His hand or the wound in His side. But I did see the well on the tel. And through the power of the Holy Spirit, like my ancestor Abraham, I too believe that the Promised One will come. After all, He came here once before.

## Translating the Land Between

Erin and I's time in Israel was significant for our spiritual growth as Christians. But it was also, unexpectedly, beneficial to the work of translation, which we are preparing to do.



*Erin and I standing at the overlook to the Temple Mount on the top of the Mount of Olives.*



*Erin and I standing in the waters of the Mediterranean at Caesarea Maritima*



*A view of a cross superimposed over the Dome of the Rock from the Dominus Flevit 'Christ Wept' church.*

Time and again, translators have struggled with how to communicate the background knowledge of the setting of Scripture's story to a language community that has either never been to Israel or which does not have additional resources, e.g., study Bibles, commentaries, devotional material, to expand their appreciation of the Bible. What word would you choose to translate 'cornerstone' in a culture where all the buildings are round? How would you explain the concept?

However, as we experienced that biblical culture firsthand, I kept remarking to Erin how often the world of the Bible reminded me of the world of my African childhood. From the harvesting techniques Ruth would have used to glean Boaz's fields to the exorcism incantations priests would have used to draw out and trap evil spirits, I saw a lot of overlap between both cultural worlds.

I believe God allowed me to go to Israel, in part, so that I would be better equipped to serve the Subula full-bible translation project. To better share His story with another Gentile nation. To help show them the intersections between their lives and those of biblical characters. To bring to life the Story that God's Word has made them part of. To tell them about that wind-swept hill in Israel where Abraham waited for a promise. A promise which was fulfilled. To tell them about the Promised One who took on their flesh, threshed grain like them, built homes with their tools, caught fish in a similar manner, rode on donkeys like they have, and so on and so forth. Our goal is to make Christ as real for them as that trip made Him for me. Then as many Subula as God reaches will rise to new life on that final day!

## PRAYER REQUESTS

- Pray that Erin and I will have safe travels as we spend the next six months on the road in partnership development.
- Pray that God would continue to raise up prayer and financial partners in the various churches we visit.
- Pray that the work of the Subula translation team will continue apace as we prepare to join them in that effort.
- Pray for peace and stability in Cameroon and the surrounding region.
- Pray for our parents as they transition back to life in America after retiring from the mission field in May.

## CONTACT

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