

My Trip to the Holy Land: Digging Through the Past and Present by Russ Powell

It's 7 AM and I'm stepping off an airplane. I expected the nine-hour flight to Tel Aviv, Israel to be a long and arduous process, but I had not begun to prepare myself for the greeting our group would receive. My first image of this distant land was not a welcoming banner or even a long line in customs to process my passport. It was machine guns, and lots of them. Immediately the shock of this foreign land made itself abundantly clear to me. This culture lived its day-to-day within the shadow of violence, and for the next twelve days, in that shadow I would join them.

On a whim I had decided to join Dr. James Taylor, chair of the Religious Studies department here at UNCC and author of the widely acclaimed *The Jesus Dynasty*, on an archaeological expedition to Jerusalem. That semester I was taking a class with Dr. Tabor when he announced our school had gotten a license to dig within the Jerusalem city limits, the first of its kind in the last 50 years. Within days I had purchased my flight to Israel, ready to dig into the past of the historically charged holy land.

For days we labored under the hot Middle Eastern sun, delving layer by layer into thousands of years of human ingenuity and achievement. Whether it was 4th century pottery, coins branded with the 1st century emblem of Pontius Pilate, or mosaic tiles from a 3rd century kitchen floor, our group was amazed at what was being uncovered. Yet it was the peoples with whom I came into contact that had the most profound effect on me.

Having lived in America my entire life, I was unfamiliar with Middle Eastern culture. As our group would finish in the afternoon, we would head back to our hotel to clean up for the evening. Interested in the city, I would take to Jerusalem, eager to learn of this religiously energized place that was so new to me. Getting lost within the temple walls, I found myself

conversing with multiple people within the various markets and shops I ventured into. Within a culture subjected to so much violence and bloodshed in recent history, I was surprised to find vibrant, loving people not only eager to tell of their own lives and stories, but also wanting to hear of my own experience. It was as if they took the time to convey their own truths of their knowledge of Israel to an outsider: truths they knew my country's media neglected to report.

One night after a dinner of falafel, a Middle Eastern pita sandwich, a few of us came upon the infamous Western Wall, also known as the 'Wailing Wall.' As Israeli soldiers patrolled the premises with jeeps and machine guns, thousands of people lined up along the wall in communal prayer. The wall is a traditional site for Jewish devotion and pilgrimage. Yet immediately contrasting the Jewish faith was the large golden roof of the Dome of the Rock, an Islamic emblem and holy place, beautifully towering above the Western Wall. The divergent meanings of the structures served as a physical reminder of the incongruity of these two peoples engaged in heated conflict. While the presence of the machine guns and amplified security around the area was a testament to the modern relations between the Muslims and Jews in Israel, I could feel the energy of the two major faiths converging on one place. As I stood bewildered, I slid off my sandals to stand barefooted: I could feel this was holy ground.

Over the week Dr. Tabor took us all around Jerusalem and throughout various regions of Israel, including the West Bank and regions considered "hostile." As I became more acquainted with this new culture, I began to feel a real sorrow for the violence occurring within these two groups of people. Having spent a week experiencing some wonderful aspects of both Muslim and Jewish culture, I felt as though I had a small taste for the joy these peoples' lives radiated. I felt connected and involved, but I also felt a bitter frustration: why couldn't we settle our petty differences to coexist? Why must the people of Israel live in the shadow of fear of terrorism and

violence? As this frustration began to pull at my heart, I began to search myself for the change I could implement to move the situation towards peace.

The lessons learned and experience gained through my trip to Israel was invaluable. Stepping into the culture and lives of these people was something I could not have gained from afar or through any sort of news media. For those two weeks in Jerusalem I dug into the soil of thousands of years of the past, plunged myself into the present time of Israeli culture, and completely reoriented my own worldview for the future. I came back to America changed for the better, one large step further in my own journey of understanding this intricate world.

