

Nelson's Notes

Feb. 11th 2018

Coming back from Israel, various people have told me, "I can't wait to hear about your trip!" Now, I love EVERYONE at St. Pete First. There are really remarkable people here. And the people that have said this to me are amongst my favorite people here. But... they're lying. Through their teeth! Have you ever sat through a slide show of people's vacations? Have you ever been through a missionary presentation with photos to enhance their boring, I mean, their compelling story? (I'm the son of missionaries. Believe me, they're horrible). Nobody really wants me to recount my vacation to Israel.

Now, to contradict myself, Ann Walton produced pictures on Facebook WHILE we were on the trip, and many of you followed her and enjoyed that. She did an awesome job. But you don't want me to show a bunch of slides of our trip to Israel and narrate the trip. That would be painful.

There *was* a spot though, that I will reflect on with you. In my previous trips to Israel, this spot lay dormant under millennia of dirt and vegetation. It wasn't until a hotel-development group began digging (around 2009) for a new hotel when they found the ruins of the old city of Magdala.

Now, finding the remains of an old town in Israel is old hat. You find old stuff all the time there, and after being in Israel, for a day or two, one ceases to be impressed with anything that isn't at least 2,000 years old. Amongst finds, some are more majestic and impressive than others. The ruins of the old town of Caesarea, for example, are quite extensive, and there's an impressive synagogue there. But it dates to only the 4th Century.

Magdala, on the other hand, is not as big, and the synagogue they discovered there is rather small (1,300 s/f). But it dates to the time of Jesus. It's only one of seven that they've ever found. It was built before Jesus was born. After the destruction of Jerusalem in 69 A.D., all synagogues faced Jerusalem. This one didn't. The entrance had stones that bore the signature of "Herod the Great" builder (he wasn't great for any other reason). This was the real deal.

Now, the New Testament doesn't give us an account of Magdala except for one of its residents – Mary Magdalene and an obscure reference in Matthew 15:39. But Matthew does say: "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people" (4:23). So it is inconceivable to me that Jesus would not have entered, worshiped and taught in this very synagogue. In the middle of this one-room structure lies a stone. They call it the Magdala Stone. I would call it a stone bench. It was a carved rectangular box with four legs. On the long sides they sculpted arches depicting the Second Temple in Jerusalem, and on one end a Menorah figured prominently. On this bench the rabbi would sit and teach. The people sat on stone benches built into the walls, with the rabbi in the middle.

That stone just captivated me. Have you ever wondered what it would have been like to hear Jesus teach? To listen to the tenor of His voice, to interpret his mannerisms, to differentiate a scowl from a twinkle in His eye? He did all of those things right there on that bench in that synagogue 1988 years ago. I walked around that synagogue more than once, and the final time with a camcorder. I'll bore you with that video sometime.

On the Mount of Beatitudes I read Matthew 5 to the group. In the Antonia Fortress I read the account of Jesus' trial. On the Sea of Galilee I read about Jesus calming the storm. Here, in Magdala, there were no such scriptures to read. I was left to my imagination, was left to my sense of wonder, and was left to listen to what He would say just to me.

I hope you're listening for His voice today.

Craig

"The Jews there were amazed and asked, 'How did this man get such learning without having been taught?'" John 7:15