

**Sojourn in the Land of the Bible  
February 27-May 14, 2009**

**A Journal of my Sabbatical  
Father John Rowan**

**Third Letter**

Saturday, February 14, 2009

We are in the 19<sup>th</sup> day of the program. The routines of the daily life have become second nature. The weather has been generally pleasant, but very hard to relate to in what you wear. If you walk in the sun, and uphill, it becomes laborious and hot, and you shed some clothes. But if you reach a shady place, and there is a breeze, you cool down immediately, and become cold. On Wednesday, we had a day that was partially rainy and cold, and so our bus trip to the Dead Sea and Masada was cancelled. I spent the day resting in the hope that I could beat a head cold that was starting up, and for the most part I was successful. It seems foolish to spend a day in bed while Jerusalem is right outside your door, but this is a hilly city, and almost any walk takes real energy.

On Friday afternoon after classes and lunch, I headed out to the Damascus Gate, which is about a half mile from our residence. This happened to be the hour for the mosque schools to be closing, and the Muslims leaving the city to go home and begin their Sabbath. The slow procession of people along the narrow cobbled streets, with the little shops open on either side, was a dense mass of humanity shuffling along one tiny step at a time. What I thought was to be a five minute walk, took a half hour. If there had been a disturbance, there would have been nowhere to go. Somehow, I relished this experience to be swallowed up in their march.

I haven't really spoken to any Arabs, except possibly the young people who serve at our table in the convent dining room. The shopkeepers are very aggressive, and do not hesitate to touch your arm or back to try to steer you into their shop. I did have two unfortunate encounters with children. In one, I was in an isolated alley and four boys, about 12 years old, began to circle around me saying things I could not understand, but conveying menace and not playfulness. When I remarked on it at lunch, someone said that the attitude of the children toward a non-Muslim may reflect what they had just heard in school. In the other incident, I was in the Muslim cemetery writing some notes; it was very isolated. Two boys came down the path and stopped by me, and came right up into my "personal space", and said: "You will give us one dollar?" I said: "No". "You will give us a cigarette?" (They were at the time passing a cigarette back and forth) "No". I reached for my stuff which I had placed on a nearby wall and began to prepare to leave. They lost interest and walked away. No big deal, but it makes you think twice about going into an isolated place. The Arab boys, coming out of the Mosque school across the alley from us, are very rough with each other. In every group of three or four, one appears to be crying. It's not a pleasant scene, but I don't think it would be wise to intervene.

This week we completed our course called “In the Footsteps of History: Exploring 4000 Years of the Land of Israel”, with teacher Jared Goldfarb. We covered a very complicated period, coming up to World War I, when the Ottoman Empire sided with the Germans, and lost its hold on Palestine, which was then put under the British Mandate, which lasted until 1948, when the land in part was given to the Jews as a homeland by the United Nations. The UN map of the proposed State of Israel was never put into actual political use, because the war with the Arab nations which immediately followed the UN declaration, ended with a cease fire border which extended the territory of Israel, the “Green Line” which remains its borders to this day. The walled cities in which the Palestinian Arabs are isolated, such as Bethlehem, are hopefully not the final resolution of how these two peoples will co-exist. Jared thinks there are reasonable people on both sides who are making small progress towards a peaceful coexistence and cooperation. The reference here is O Jerusalem!, by Larry Collins and Dominique LaPierre, a day by day and minute by minute story of the historic struggle for Jerusalem and the birth of Israel. Another reference is the great movie, “Lawrence of Arabia”. Where Lawrence fits in to the story is in the World War I era, when he gave military advice to the Arab nations to get out from under the domination of the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman Turks and the Arab tribes were both of the same religion, Islam, but they were different ethnically. In the end, Lawrence became disenchanted with the British, because they had made inconsistent promises to the Arabs and the Jews.

This week at the Ecce Homo Convent, a British group of Muslims and Jews and Christians spent a few days here working on their interfaith purpose. We all ate in the same dining room and it was a modest sign of hope and showed in part, the mission of this convent.

On Monday night our teacher Flavio Gillio, S.J., showed us a video based on the book The Bible Unearthed, by Israel Finkelstein and Neil Silberman. This is going back to the idea I mentioned before, a major issue in biblical studies, as to what evidence archeology can bring to the question of the historical accuracy of the narratives of the First Testament. Archeology is a relatively recent science; in its beginnings it was used to confirm the historicity of biblical texts. But lately archeology has become a more independent discipline, sifting its evidence and then stating its (provisional) findings. For example, that Jericho at the time of Joshua (see Joshua 6:1) was not a major fortified Canaanite city, and that there is no evidence that any major military operation ever took place there. What becomes of “Joshua fit the battle of Jericho? We are reminded of the principle: “Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence”. Application: the fact that you have not found evidence of the military conquest and acquisition of the lands of the Canaanites by the Israelites after the desert sojourn, does not necessarily mean that it didn’t happen the way the Bible tells the story. But it may persuade you to look for another theory of how the Israelites got dominance over the land, for example, by simple infiltration and hard work on the land, and then later telling their story in a grand heroic way. I am reminded of the way in which national history is embellished after the fact. I believe that Patrick Henry’s great speech to the Virginia House of Burgesses, purportedly given before the Declaration of Independence (1776) in which he declared: “Give me liberty or give me death!”, was actually composed in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, when elocution contests were the rage.

I spent some time at the Rockefeller Archeological Museum, in East Jerusalem. A fantastic collection in a beautiful building. It's nice to know that the Rockefellers, from New York State, did such a noble service in the preservation of the antiquities of Israel. This museum is free, and just a short distance from the convent. In the days of the Roman governance of Israel (63 BC to 325 AD), the rich did not pay taxes, only the poor. (So you see, G.W. Bush did not invent this policy!) Instead the rich were expected to do some public work (liturgeia) like building a fountain, or a public plaza, or a temple, in which they could name themselves the first highpriest. This would appear to be easier than six years in the seminary!

We began a new course this week, on the Book of Amos. The teacher is Fr. Guy Theunis, a Belgian who belongs to the White Fathers of Africa. He lives in the White Fathers community which is attached to St. Anne's Church, just a block away from us. Jerome Murphy-O'Connor calls this church, which dates from Crusader times, the most beautiful church in Jerusalem. Its crypt is said to enshrine the home of the Virgin Mary and of her parents Joachim and Anne. Next to the church are the ruins of ancient medicinal baths where Jesus healed a man ill for 38 years. (John 5:1-13) All this is just a short step away from our residence.

Why the Book of Amos? For one thing (which I did not know) Amos is the *first* written book of the First Testament. Written in the days right before the Babylonian Captivity, (586 BC) coincidental with the use of writing by the Israelites (somewhat later than the Egyptian use of writing.) So, our teacher suggested, when you want to read the Bible from the beginning, you would not start with Genesis, the first book in the canon, but with Amos, the first written entry, which would also give you a key to all the other 24 prophetic books. We began our critical reading of the oracle of judgments against the nations: chapter 1 and 2. You will see that the crimes of the nations (who do not have the benefit of the Torah) are what we would call crimes against humanity, slavery, ethnic cleansing, and violence. The nations should be aware of these offences because of their human conscience. The crimes of Israel and Judah (the divided kingdoms who have the blessing of God's law) are idolatry and infidelity.

Amos says: "Flight shall perish from the swift, and the strong man shall not retain his strength; the warrior shall not save his life, nor the bowman stand his ground; the swift of foot shall not escape, nor the horseman save his life. And the most stouthearted of warriors shall flee naked on that day, says the Lord." Note the seven categories: swift, strong man, warrior, bowman, swift of foot, horseman, stouthearted. Why seven? It's a literary device to say: *every one* of them will be routed. Seven is the perfect number.

This brought us to a little side bar on numbers in the Bible; here is my summary:

- 1 The Holy One
- 2 Humanity (Man and Woman)
- 3 1+2 Spiritual Beings
- 4 Non-spiritual beings, the earth, the four corners
- 5 Action, like the five fingers of the hand
- 6 7-1 Something incomplete, sin, 666

7	3+4 All creation, spiritual and material, the nations
8	7+1 The New Creation
9	3x3 Angels
10	5x2 The Ten Commandments
12	3x4 Something complete: Israel, the 12 Tribes
14	2x7 Complete (example: the genealogy in Matthew's Gospel)
40	Preparation, as in the desert
70	Complete human action, as in forgiveness
144	12x12
10,000	Incalculable

I want to make part of my notes on this study of the Bible text and the application of archeology to help us date the text, identify the writer and determine his /her purpose, an important teaching from the Second Vatican Council document on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, which teaching is taken in large part from the encyclical letter of Pope Pius XII *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943): "12. Seeing that, in sacred Scripture, God speaks through men in human fashion, it follows that the interpreter of sacred Scripture, if he is to ascertain what God has wished to communicate to us, should carefully search out the meaning the sacred writers really had in mind, that meaning which God thought well to manifest through the medium of their words." In other words, we regard the intended meaning of the sacred writer to be the meaning which God intended, that is, inspired. So in determining the meaning of the sacred writer five hundred years before Christ, we do not assume that he/she was composing a work of critical, objective history, because that literary form had not yet been invented.

Today, I had a real treat. I had lunch at the Ecole Biblique with one of my heroes, one of my lures to Jerusalem, Fr. Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, O.P., a professor at the school, whom I had for a few courses at the Georgetown Scripture Institute over the years I have been attending that program. One of the participants in our sabbatical program, a Dominican from the same Irish province as Fr. Jerome, heard that I was interested in meeting up with him and invited me to this lunch. With this meeting I will have accomplished one of my foremost objectives in coming here. During our conversation, I told Fr. Jerome how I had used his analysis of Luke 9:28 (The Transfiguration of Jesus) as the main idea in my funeral homily for Jim Coffey, that Jim was an "explaining angel" sent by God to help us get through mysterious moments in life. Jerome said: "I'm very happy that you remembered what I taught." Golden moment.

JR