

# Ordinary mortals, biblical landscape

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*The latest fashions in Madaba. Photo: AFP*

## **Belinda Jackson rediscovers the good, the bad and the ugly of the Bible as it happened in Jordan.**

If you were talking about famous locations from books, surely Jordan would be up there in the top 10, with that No. 1 bestseller, the Bible, being set in large part in this tiny Middle Eastern country. Pretty much all the godly gang hung out or passed through Jordan at some time or other.

Why don't schoolteachers give Bible studies with the backdrop of a big world map? Before I set foot in this ancient land, I thought Nebuchadnezzar was a 15-litre bottle of champagne, not a Babylonian king. A map would have improved my geographic knowledge no end: a miracle of ruffians turned into pigs here, John the Baptist beheaded there, Lot's wife turned into a pillar of salt down by the sea, Moses buried just over that ridge.

The land that is modern Jordan is a hot location in both the Old and New Testament, though at the time it was known as three tribal kingdoms - Edom, Moab and Ammon.

My tour of biblical proportions begins at the main airport in Amman in a parody of the expression "We've got both kinds of music here: country and western", when Mohammad, my gentlemanly guide, piles me into the car and tells me, "We've got all three religions here," meaning Islam, Christianity and Judaism. Conveniently, Jordan, like many Arab countries, bothers its pretty head only with the Abrahamic religions, unconcerned with such biggies as Buddhism or Hinduism.

Mohammad and I have teamed up for a week of car touring through Jordan. The dashing old bugger, with his silver hair, compulsory moustache and dark brown eyes, roars past Jordan's many military checkpoints waving like a world-weary queen. Palestinian by birth, as is up to one-third of Jordan's 6 million residents, he's lived among the biblical landscape all his life, so it's like talking about his old mates: Jesus, Jacob, Joshua and the 12-strong Apostles gang.

We soon give modern Amman the slip and head south for a pootle alongside the Dead Sea and the King's Highway, a 3000-year-old route first mentioned in the Old Testament's Exodus. This ancient trading route has been traversed by everyone: Christian pilgrims to Mount Nebo, Muslim pilgrims to Mecca, Israelites to the Promised Lands and Crusaders to everywhere.

One afternoon we visit Bethany, the site of Jesus's baptism, and are piled into the back of the truck that will take us down to the River Jordan. The group includes a plump Arab family, a few German dears sporting muffin tops and an American power couple who do the tour in patent leather shoes and Versace scarves, each toting laptop bags.

"And this is where Jesus was baptised," intones the official guide, pointing at a dry riverbed, the legacy of 40 years of drought and diverted water. The empty creek is an arm of the River Jordan, which flows into the Dead Sea, forming a natural border between Jordan, Palestine and Israel. Despite the absence of water, it's amazing stuff, even if you've lapsed in your religion to the point of no return.

"What's that over there?" I ask, pointing to an impossibly long, rickety ladder propped up against a cliff, leading into a dark cave. "Oh, that's where John the Baptist used to live," the guide says, offhandedly. This is also the site where the prophet Elijah was reputedly whisked up into heaven in a whirl of fire, chariots and horses, and where the first five apostles hooked up, deciding to follow Jesus, thus creating a new religion that would become the world's largest. No wonder there are so many churches on the site - from Greek Orthodox to Russian - all watched over by a swag of bored border guards washing the hallowed dust from their jeeps.

After another group trots through the scrub, we come across the River Jordan proper and I splash some cool, brown water at Israel, just a few metres away, and admire its smart, new stone buildings, which put Jordan's humble thatch roof and wooden platform to shame. It's a classic case of one-upmanship, Mohammed tells me, with Jordan and Israel disputing which side of the river Jesus was baptised on. However, Pope Benedict XVI visited last year and determined that it all happened in Jordan. In their jubilation, the Jordanians, who love a good mosaic, made a mosaic of the Pope in a stretch Popemobile, along with Jordanian royalty, for the occasion.

It's not all shiny miracles and baptisms in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. The country has had its own dark biblical days. Jordan is said to be the site of the original Sin Cities, the Pentapolis, or five cities including Sodom and Gomorrah, which gained particular notoriety for their inhabitants' willingness to get it on with whomever presented themselves. The story, as told in Genesis, goes that when God sent down angels to rein them in, the sacrilegious Sodomites even propositioned the heavenly bodies.



Now, the estimated location is known rather appropriately as al-Lisan, or The Tongue, a sliver of land that juts into the southern end of the Dead Sea. Perfectly flat and divided into little farming allotments, it looks like rural Netherlands, except for the profusion of donkeys.

Driving away along the coast-hugging road by the Dead Sea, we pass a long, rocky protrusion that points up to the sky. "Oh and that's Lot's wife," Mohammad says as an aside.

Ah, the contrary missus who turned into a pillar of salt as she ignored God and her husband's advice not to look back at the evil city as they fled the fire and brimstone God was pouring down on the Sodomites.

"I tell you what, she must have been one tall woman," I muse to myself.

"Well, we know there were giants then," Mohammad says, matter-of-factly. "Goliath's people? Remember?" It must be easier to be a believer when surrounded with such evidence instead of learning this in a sticky classroom in the Australian tropics.

Interestingly, while Israel would like to lay claim to the baptism site, it's not clamouring for Sodom and Gomorrah, yet it does boast a pillar on the rock-salt Mount Sodom, also called Lot's Wife.

Another saucy spot nearby is Mukawir, now a ruined fortress where the cheeky teen Salome danced the raunchy Dance of the Seven Veils in front of her uncle, King Herod of Judea. With a bit of egging on from her bad mum, Herodias, Salome subsequently demanded the head of John the Baptist as payment. Today, the region's biggest drawcard is the nearby ancient city of Madaba and the floor of its Greek Orthodox basilica of St George, which boasts the remains of a mosaic that forms a map of the world in AD560. The resident guide talks me through it all: Egypt here, Bethlehem there, Jerusalem up a bit ...

"It's a historical map, not a geographic map," the guide says mildly when I query the fact that Egypt is on the wrong side of the Red Sea and the Dead Sea is absolutely enormous, with a couple of prophet-looking guys rowing a boat in it. Given Moses and his people were lost in the relatively small wilderness of the Sinai peninsula for 40 years, it would have been even longer if he was using this beautifully skewiff map.

Moses features prominently throughout Jordan. One morning I trot up Mount Nebo and look out to the site where he struck his staff into the rocky ground and water welled up for his thirsty people during their exodus from Egypt to the land of milk and honey. Spread out below are bald, rocky hills, olive groves and a crazy, happy little baby donkey running down the road. In the distance are the Holy Lands, now Israel and Palestine, which God showed Moses before he died, here on the mountain, at the ripe old age of 120. It is told he shot up to heaven and his body was never found.

"It was a time of magic on Earth," explains a devout friend. "But that time ended with the last of the prophets."

Later that week, I'm standing at a beauty spot overlooking the ancient city of Petra. The sky is dark and heavy but then, just as we are turning away, the clouds are rent by spears of light and the heavens open, blood-red sun pouring across the ancient ruins of Petra. It's so beautiful, it's so Old Testament. "Why, how appropriate," I think, tasting the magic. "God sky."

*Belinda Jackson was a guest of Intrepid Travel.*