

ISRAEL Teaching Letter

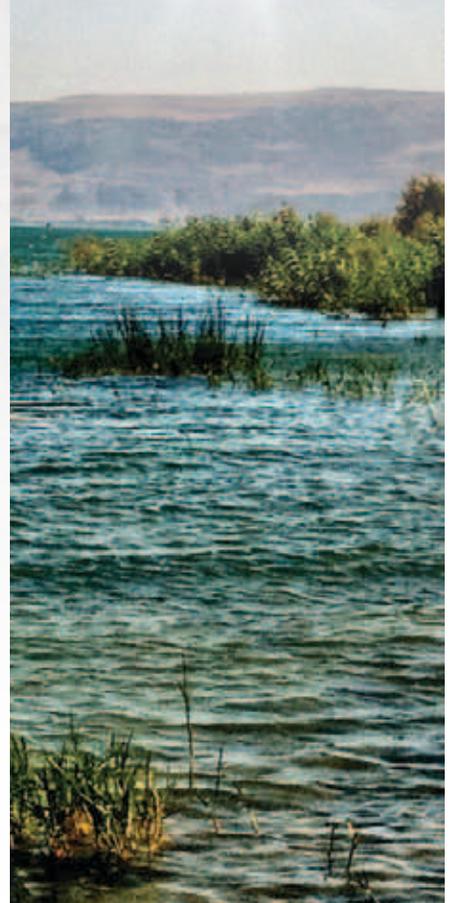
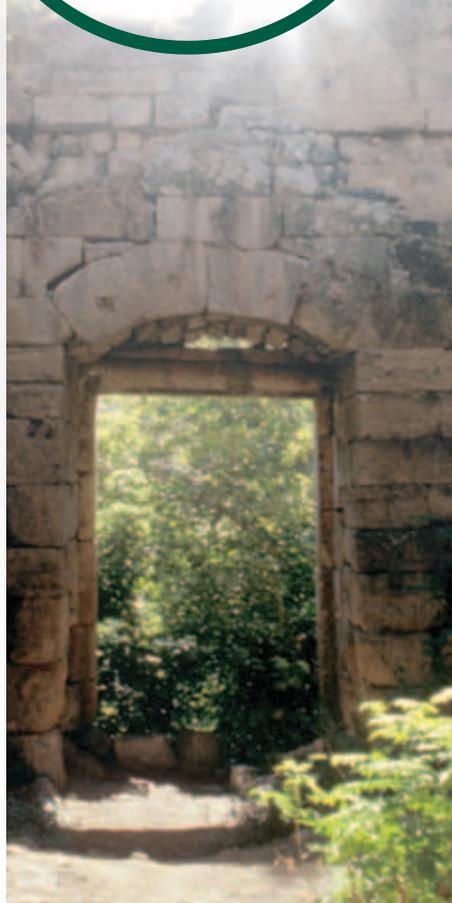
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The Bible through the LENS of the Land



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When you look back over your life, there are always places, people, and memories that stand out—some for positive reasons and others because they caused pain. Then there is the special place we call “home.” For this teaching letter, I have chosen three places and events that I think would be strong memories for Yeshua (Jesus): Nazareth, where He grew up and where He was later rejected; the Sea of Galilee, where He walked on the water; and Caesarea Philippi, where He chose to make one of the most important prophetic proclamations of His life.

I have not addressed the theological issues in these accounts; rather, my intent is to help you contextualize the events in their natural setting and in the culture of the Second Temple Period when Yeshua and His disciples were living. You will see how understanding the cultural and physical settings of the biblical stories enriches their meaning and how important it is to include this aspect in Bible study.



Nazareth



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Caesarea Philippi



Sea of Galilee

Nazareth: A Backwoods Town Exposed to a Wider World

So He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And as His custom was, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read. And He was handed the book of the prophet Isaiah. And when He had opened the book, He found the place where it was written: "The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed; to proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD." Then He closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all who were in the synagogue were fixed on Him.

And He began to say to them, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." So all bore witness to Him, and marveled at the gracious words which proceeded out of His mouth. And they said, "Is this not Joseph's son?" He said to them, "You will surely say this proverb to Me, 'Physician, heal yourself! Whatever we have heard done in Capernaum, do also here in Your country.'" Then He said, "Assuredly, I say to you, no prophet is accepted in his own country"...

So all those in the synagogue, when they heard these things, were filled with wrath, and rose up and thrust Him out of the city; and they led Him to the brow of the hill on which their city was built, that they might throw Him down over the cliff. Then passing through the midst of them, He went His way (Luke 4:16–23, 28–30).

Nazareth was a small town of approximately 120–150 people at the time of Yeshua. Its name comes from the Hebrew word *netzer* which means branch or shoot. Interestingly, Nazareth is never mentioned in the Hebrew Scriptures (Gen.–Mal.), or by Josephus, the historian. In the book *Jesus and the Land*, Charles Page tells us that archaeological "evidence also reveals that Nazareth had been occupied in the Bronze and Iron Ages, but that it was abandoned near the time of the Assyrian conquest of the Northern Kingdom (722/721 BCE)... There is no evidence of any destruction at this time. In other



A shepherd from Nazareth Village, a reenactment of village life in Yeshua's time in the middle of modern-day Nazareth

words, Nazareth is so small and insignificant that the Assyrians did not even bother to occupy it." Bargil Pixner says that, in about 100 BC, Nazareth was reoccupied by a group of Jews returning from Babylon who were Hasidim, a very religious Jewish group similar to the Essenes. It is possible that the name was chosen because they believed that the Messiah would be the *netzer* or shoot born from their clan or group.

The name "Nazareth" is believed to come from Isaiah 11:1–2, which says, "There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse, and a Branch [*netzer*] shall grow out of his roots. The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon Him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD." If Pixner is correct, then the people of Nazareth were descendants of King David who believed that the Messiah would be one of their clan.

Nazareth is located in the lower Galilean hills, rising 1,600 feet (488 meters) above the fertile Jezreel Valley. The town of Nazareth only had one spring, which undoubtedly limited its growth. It was considered a backwoods type of town—a fact that may explain Nathanael's exclamation, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46).

Bruce Schein taught at the Institute of Holy Land Studies, founded by Dr. G. Douglas Young (who also founded Bridges for Peace). He took his students to walk the land of Israel with the gospel of John in hand. Jim Solberg, our US national director, was one of his students and gave me a copy of his book, which is now out of print. Schein says, "Nazareth of the Galilee seems an odd place from which to expect a warrior king or an anointed one to emerge. Perhaps it is as odd a place for building dreams as that tiny farm village in Judea



A first-century house uncovered in Nazareth



Photo by Isranet/IAA



A first-century carpenter's shop in Nazareth

called Bethlehem, from which came the great King David! Nazareth does not lie at the top of the ridge overlooking the plain in a position for defense or control. Rather, after the tiring climb up the winding path to the top of the ridge, aching legs must still carry the travelers at least another twenty minutes before the comforts of the village are reached."

One might imagine that someone growing up in such a small, theologically conservative hometown might not understand the world at large. However, even though Nazareth was tiny, it was close to a major trade route and was only 3.5 miles (5.6 kilometers) from Sepphoris (also called Zippori), a major center built between 3 BC and AD 10 by Herod Antipas as his capital city until he built Tiberias in AD 18 to 22. According to Josephus, Sepphoris was the "ornament of all Galilee."

Yeshua would have been learning the building trade from Joseph. By the way, the word translated as "carpenter" in our English Bibles is *tehton* in Greek, which literally means craftsman. While woodworking was certainly practiced, stone was a more common building material because it was more readily available. Joseph could have been a stonemason, a carpenter, or an artisan who made elaborate mosaic floors. Whatever his trade, there is a strong likelihood that he and his sons would have been part of the team of craftsmen who built Sepphoris, one of the largest cities in northern Israel where the largest building program of his day was taking place. Today, it is an archaeological site well worth a visit. So, Yeshua grew up in a small town, knowing everyone, learning from conservative Jewish teachers, but was certainly exposed to the wider world.

Early in His public ministry, Yeshua came to His home country, as we read in Luke 4. In the synagogue, He read from Isaiah 61, a Messianic passage. Scripture is very clear that His family and friends in Nazareth did not receive Him. Neal May explains, "It is no wonder the crowd in the synagogue at Nazareth reacted with such hostility to the words of Jesus. He not only attributed the Messianic words of Isaiah to Himself, but He also exalted the faith of the Gentiles over their stiff-necked opposition to the will of God." The townspeople responded by trying to kill Him, attempting to push Him over the precipice outside of the town.

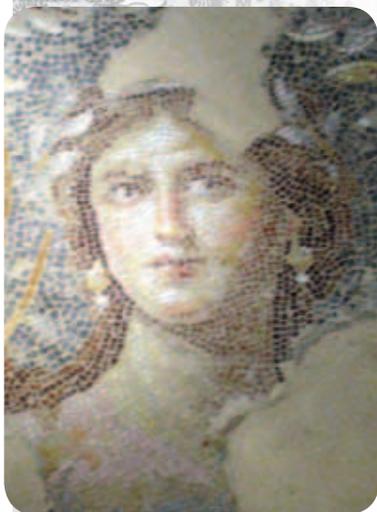
My husband Tom and I lived in a *kibbutz* (communal settlement) just down the hill from Nazareth in the '80s for about five months. We walked up the steep hills to reach the center of ancient Nazareth; I can still see the winding switchback road that climbed to the top of the precipice. This is an instance where understanding the geography of the region helps one to visualize the impossible situation Yeshua was in, literally staring death in the face, and yet, through the grace of God, managing to escape. It seems certain to me that this event was the source of much disappointment and pain for Yeshua. Rejection is always hard, especially when it comes from those closest to you.

Caesarea Philippi: A Pagan City Chosen for a Special Proclamation

In the northern part of Israel, lying in the foothills of Mount Hermon, the highest peak in current-day Israel, we find Caesarea Philippi, known today as Banias. It is one of the most beautiful areas of Israel. The source waters of the Jordan River are in this area, with many waterfalls and rushing streams. As often as possible, we find an excuse to spend a day at Banias and nearby Tel Dan. I often feel closer to Yeshua in the places of natural beauty rather than the places that have churches built over them. Surely He would have traveled to the places that display His marvelous creation.

In Matthew 16, we have an account of Yeshua and His disciples (*talmidim*) traveling to Caesarea Philippi. Interestingly, it seems that all they do there is have a conversation! Scripture does not tell us of any

The Mona Lisa of the Galilee—an ancient mosaic discovered in Sepphoris





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ministry or healings He performed there. We find the account in Matthew 16:13–20.

When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, saying, “Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?” So they said, “Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered and said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus answered and said to him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” Then He commanded His disciples that they should tell no one that He was Jesus the Christ.

We know that Baniyas is a beautiful place today, but what kind of a place was it when Yeshua visited? According to Neal W. May, “The site has always maintained a religious / cultic presence and was sought as a popular place of worship for Semitic deities. Baal, the Canaanite deity, was worshiped here during the times of the Old Testament (Tenach) (Josh. 11:17; 12:7; 13:5; Judges 3:3; 1 Chron. 5:23). The Greeks later worshiped their deity, Pan, at the same location earning the locale the name of Paneasar Panias, ‘The Deity of Pan.’” It is a place that was always associated with pagan worship of other gods. Worship rites included base sexual rituals, and even human sacrifice.

Howard Vos says, “One may question that those ancient enemies of Israel were as evil as the Bible claims that they were, but even a superficial glance at Canaanite re-

ligion alone ably demonstrates their iniquity. Base sex worship was prevalent, and religious prostitution even commanded; human sacrifice was common; and it was a frequent practice—in an effort to placate their gods—to kill young children and bury them in the foundations of a house or public building at the time of construction: Joshua 6:26, ‘In his days did Hiel the Bethelite build Jericho: he laid the foundation thereof in Abiram his firstborn...’”

Dr. David Allen Lewis writes, “Centuries before the time of Christ, the inhabitants of the region called their city Panias. This was in honor of the fertility god Pan who also demanded human sacrifices. In the spring of each year, the Pan-priests cast a young virgin girl into the swirling waters of the stream issuing from the base of Mt. Hermon.”

In Yeshua’s day, it was a Roman city. Herod the Great built a white marble temple dedicated to the worship of the emperor. Later, Herod’s son, Philip, built the city of Caesarea Philippi, naming it after Caesar and himself. Today, the place is called Baniyas, a mispronunciation of Panias. (In Arabic, there is no “p” sound.)

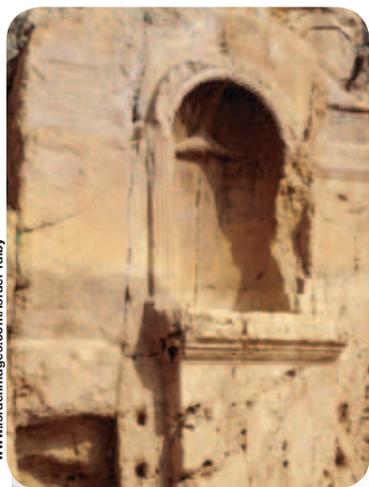
The Baniyas waterfall in the Golan Heights, close to Caesarea Philippi



Remnants of the temple of Pan at the ancient Roman city of Caesarea Philippi



www.israelimages.com/Richard Nowitz



A shrine to the Roman god, Pan, at the ancient temple remains in Caesarea Philippi



Stormy east winds on the Sea of Galilee

So, why did Yeshua and His disciples go to such an out-of-the-way place—about 25 miles (40 kilometers) north from the Galilee? Immediately before this incident, they were near the Sea of Galilee. Not only did they have to walk such a long distance, but the journey was all uphill. The Sea of Galilee is about 700 feet (213 meters) below sea level and Caesarea Philippi is 1,150 feet (350 meters) above sea level. It was not an easy trek.

Dr. Lewis wrote, “It is here in this strange atmosphere that Jesus chose to give the ultimate prophecy concerning the final destiny of His Church. ‘I will build My Church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.’ [Matt. 16:18]...I pondered this strange question, ‘Jesus, why did you go to Caesarea Philippi?’...Jesus chose to go to a place overshadowed with the presence of the demonic, a place with a history of pagan worship and human sacrifice. My question was not answered on that first trip to the Holy Land. It was months later, as I was researching various matters in the Library of Congress, that I began to look up references to Caesarea Philippi. Imagine my surprise when I found authors who suggest that the inhabitants of the Israel of Jesus’ time had a special nickname for the Roman city...They called it the Gate of Hell!...Jesus wanted His disciples to hear Him make the great prophecy at the very citadel of hell rather than in the courtyard of the Temple.”

It seems that Yeshua went to the place that was considered evil and knocked on the Devil’s front door, proclaiming that He would be victorious over all the forces of evil. He would use flawed human beings, but they would not go in their own strength—He would build His Church!

The Sea of Galilee: Situating for Creating Storms

Immediately Jesus made His disciples get into the boat and go before Him to the other side, while He sent the multitudes away. And when He had sent the multitudes away, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray. Now when evening came, He was alone there. But the boat was now in the middle of the sea, tossed by the waves, for the wind was contrary. Now in the fourth watch of the night Jesus went to them, walking on the sea. And when the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out for fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, “Be of good cheer! It is I; do not be afraid.” And Peter answered Him and said, “Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water.” So He said, “Come.” And when Peter had come down out of the boat, he walked on the water to go to Jesus. But when he





Photo by Jeannette v.d. Merwe

saw that the wind was boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink he cried out, saying, “Lord, save me!” And immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and caught him, and said to him, “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?” And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. Then those who were in the boat came and worshiped Him, saying, “Truly You are the Son of God” (Matt. 14:22–33).

This story has always captured my imagination. How could anyone who had experienced Yeshua’s mastery over the elements ever be the same? Several years ago, a group of actors put on a play about the life of Yeshua. In one act, they portrayed Him walking on the water. It was quite realistic-looking but not real! They had submerged a picnic table in the water, and the actor walked on the table in a way that made him appear to be walking on water. The fact is, of course, that we cannot walk on top of water. Yeshua was clearly operating in the realm of the miraculous!

A few years ago, Bridges for Peace made a contribution to help build a medical clinic on the hills northwest of the Sea of Galilee. At the dedication, an Israeli leader made reference to this miracle in his speech, saying “We are experiencing today a miracle of Christian–Jewish cooperation, not too far from where Jesus walked on the water.” What a shock to hear Yeshua’s miracle referenced by an Israeli in Israel! God is still in the miracle-working business!

Visitors to Israel are often surprised at the size of the Galilee. They expect a large body of water—after all, it is called a sea. Actually, the Galilee—known in Hebrew as the Kinneret (“harp”) because the lake is harp-shaped—is only 13 miles (21 kilometers) long, 7.5 miles (12 kilometers) wide at the northern end, and between 130–160

feet (40–49 meters) deep. The Kinneret is located in the Jordan Valley, which is part of the Syrio-African Rift Valley. This Rift Valley continues southward to the Dead Sea, which is the lowest place on earth. On the east and west sides of the Kinneret are high hills.

According to the *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, “The mountains of upper Galilee rise northwest of it to the height of about 4,000 ft. [1,219 meters] above sea level, while the hills immediately east and west of the lake ascend abruptly to heights of about 2,000 ft. [610 meters] above sea level. This creates a sharp drop of approximately 2,650 ft. [808 meters] from the mountain tops down to the lake’s surface where the foot of the hills often abuts the lake.” Because of this geological formation, the Kinneret is subject to storms which can form quickly. *Zondervan* says, “The cool air masses from the mountain heights rush down the steep slopes with great force causing violent eruptions of the lake. Such tempests are not infrequent and are extremely dangerous to small craft.”

A few years ago, Tom and I went camping on the shores of the Kinneret with our two dogs. The lake was perfectly calm in the morning, but about three in the afternoon, the wind began to blow and soon we were enjoying three-foot-high (one-meter-high) waves. This is normal—nearly every afternoon, refreshing wind arrives and ruffles the surface of the lake. Some hours later, a violent windstorm woke us as we were sleeping in the tent. Our dogs were frightened and, as tree branches began to crash around us, we made a quick decision to pack up and go home to Jerusalem.

Scripture records two storms on the Sea of Galilee. In one, Yeshua was asleep in the boat, but when His disciples woke Him up,



View from a hilltop overlooking the Sea of Galilee

Satellite image of the Sea of Galilee



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“Peace, be still.” Mark 4:39



Photo by Jeannette v.d. Merwe

He rebuked the wind and waves, saying “Peace, be still” (Mark 4:39). In the Matthew passage, Yeshua’s disciples got in the boat and found themselves in such a fierce storm that they feared for their lives. This time, He came to them walking on top of the water. I am sure we would also have not believed what we were seeing. After they realized that it was Yeshua, their response was to acknowledge Him as the Son of God.

Come to Israel...Where the Bible Comes Alive

At Bridges for Peace, we bring Christians to Israel each year. My husband is a government-licensed guide in Israel and guides many Christian groups through the Land. Over and over, we watch as the Bible begins to come to life when Christians see biblical events through the lens of the land, culture, and language of the Bible. In these three incidents, I have attempted to give you a window into how your life can be impacted by a visit to Israel. Come and experience the Word in new and old ways. You can walk today where Yeshua walked. However, I must warn you that Israel is addictive. Like most of us, you will discover that once is simply not enough.

By Rev. Rebecca J. Brimmer, International President and CEO

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All Scripture is taken from the New King James Version, unless otherwise noted.

Bridges for Peace is a Jerusalem-based, Bible-believing Christian organization supporting Israel and building relationships between Christians and Jews worldwide through education and practical deeds expressing God’s love and mercy.

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