

Jordan, Sinai and Egypt – 28 October 2011 by Robert Cotton

Next week I set off for Mount Sinai with 26 pilgrims. We will travel to Jordan first, and follow with 3 days in Egypt afterwards. Had we been offered the chance, I would like to have undertaken the journey the other way around. By going from Egypt, through the Sinai desert to Jordan, we would have been following closely in Moses' footsteps, according to the stories of Exodus. Yet there are times that, by following a story in reverse, new meanings can emerge: before we understand Z we need to understand Y, which does not make sense until we grasp X Indeed, as you probably know, Genesis 1 was one of the last parts of the Old Testament to be written. It was only during the exile of the Jews in Babylon that they came up against a very powerful religion that had a radically different story of creation. In the light of that they realised that, in order to understand the stories written many centuries earlier, they had first to describe the sort of God they worshipped. So we hear in the opening chapters of Genesis stories about a God of order, creativity, inspiration, tenderness and faithfulness – all of which are needed for us to understand the earlier stories God's dealings with Abraham, Moses and David, who are fickle, changeable, cautious, frightened and untrustworthy.

While in Jordan we will be visiting two sites that are the location for two stories that mean a great deal to me. Genesis 32 recounts the tale of Jacob wrestling at Jabbok – is it with an angel or is it with God? What we know is that, at the end of his dark night, Jacob becomes a new man, his name changing to Israel. The message is clear: true discipleship will occasionally be demanding, requiring of us all our strength and determination – at times, it may feel as though we are up against God. Yet God does not overwhelm us and we are blessed in the struggle.

The other site I am looking forward to seeing is one of the sites where it is claimed that Jesus was baptised. There are many such places, but this one is quite convincing to me (before I have even seen it) because it is in Jordan. In the words, Jesus will have been baptised not from the safety of "home territory" (the land of Israel), for baptism is a symbol of a journey: from slavery to freedom, from death to life, from Egypt to Israel. Jesus goes to "the other side" (whether that is characterised by sin, disease or death) to join us in our journey, through the waters, towards the Promised Land.

Egypt is going to resonate with meaning for me for other reasons. First, it is, as we speak, a country in some sort of turmoil, in need of change, which requires what was demanded of Jacob: courage, determination and readiness to fight what appears to be evil (but may be a source of blessing). The Coptic Church is under a great deal of pressure at the moment. Whereas we are not scheduled to meet representatives of the Copts, I do want to see at least one of their churches, to be able to pray for them with better insight and devotion. Secondly, Egypt provides the "back story" of the book of Exodus. The Jews may have had practically nothing to do with the Pharaohs or the Pyramids (which are on our tourist route). But it is important to locate the Biblical stories in real history – they are not merely symbolic stories. One of the crucial aspects of the incarnation is that Jesus came and lived among us in a real human way – not as a "generalised" human being – but as a 1st century Palestinian Jew. That is why Luke so carefully locates Jesus in the history of the Roman Empire – he is saying "this really happened to a real human".

Sandwiched between Jordan and Egypt, we will be spending two nights close by Mount Sinai. What can I say? I have never been there, so I do wonder how the reality will match my expectations. Sinai is a place of great holiness, a place where these coincide: the burning bush and God's direct revelation to Moses, including the speaking of a new name ('I am who I am'); the giving of the law, in particular the 10 Commandments – yet also, there is the re-giving of the law after Moses destroyed the first tablets of stone in anger on finding the people of Israel worshipping the Golden Calf (so Law and renewal/forgiveness are located at the same place); 1100 years of icon painting as devout monks have tried to convey through this medium something of the truth and beauty of God; the site of the finding of Codex Sinaiticus, and still the place where a great library of some of the very earliest manuscripts exist. Presence and revelation: my prayer is that we will be fully present to God in this place, and that, should God choose, we will see some of God's beauty and truth afresh.

I hope to write a daily blog about our pilgrimage. If the hotel's internet connection is good enough we will try to keep you informed about the daily happenings on this pilgrimage.