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## Short Term Travel to the Holy Land: Questions of Potency, Pilgrimage, and Potential

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### Recommended Citation

Hattingh, S., Fitzsimmons, P., & Hattingh, P. (2019). Short term travel to the Holy Land: Questions of potency, pilgrimage, and potential. *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies*, 15(1), 212-236. Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/jams/vol15/iss1/15/>

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Sherene Hattingh, Phil Fitzsimmons, and Paul Hattingh

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# Short Term Travel to the Holy Land: Questions of Potency, Pilgrimage, and Potential

## Introduction: A Deeply Personal Focus and Form

The purpose of this article is to unpack the findings of a qualitative pilot study that investigated the impact on two participants undertaking a tour of the Holy Land. This developed into a methodological pastiche of autobiography (Nueman and Newman 2018:1) and collaborative auto-ethnography (Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez 2012:17). Initially, the aim was to understand the overall “travel effects” as understood by a larger cohort organized by the South Pacific Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Australia. A total of 22 Adventist workers travelled through Israel for 10 days, however as the volume of data collected, which included “sensorial qualities of place and place-making, urban spaces and places, walking as relational practice, thinking photographically, the creative and narrative qualities of Flâneurial walking, and issues of power, gender, and class” (Cuthcer 2018:viii), it became almost overwhelming. Hence, we decided to take up Speedy’s (2015:101) recommendation that we commence “deliberately small, partial, contingent and particular.”

This autobiographical approach uses an intersection of “writing through diary eyes” (Higgins and Madden 2018:22), “intimate and vulnerable auto-ethnographic reflections” (Boon, Butler, and Jeffries 2018:15) and “gateway to storying photographs” (Langman and Pick 2018:4). Although focusing on “self as researchers” we deemed this approach was the most appropriate first step for the investigation “in order to interrogate and elucidate broader social processes” (Boon et al. 2018:7).

Given the choice of methodology, the modality of this article is very different. There are several points contributing to this which we believe need to be made clear from the outset. The first relates to the bricolage of autobiographical method chosen. This design is not an approach that seeks to use large sample sizes and make broad “bell-curve” generalizations. Instead, it seeks to “understand projects that deal with personal experiences that we want to understand more fully, deeply, and meaningfully” (Adams, Jones, and Ellis 2015:47). These kinds of investigations deal with the “intimacies cultivated alone” (Thompson 2017:32), or of one or two participants as they “consider the way that narratives of the self construct and reproduce identity” (Thompson-Lee 2017:20). This design was chosen because in the initial stages of developing this project, it became clear that the research discussions were constantly returning to narrative type language and form due to the anticipated personal nature of the actual experience, as well as the excitement of actually walking in spaces that had only previously been ideationally realized through studying scripture.

The second caveat needing clarification is the written means through which blurred autobiographical data is represented. As this form of research relies on deep personal reflexivity, connecting “the lived, inside moments of experience” with “an ‘epistemology of insiderness’ of being” (Adams, et al. 2014:31) the data is portrayed narratively as “deep emotional terrain” (Smartt Guillion 2016:25). Indeed, all sections of this paper are very different to the standard modality of journal articles, incorporating “writing that enables intimacy in the study of culture” (Goodall 2000:14).

Hence, this article is descriptive and analytical, focusing on the moments of transformative learning which the researchers as participants have undertaken (Olson 2015:717). It is about the changes that are experienced and noted through the writing of the participating researchers. As Heitmann (2011:31) states, “At a personal level, no two individuals are alike and there are significant differences in attitudes, perceptions and motivation. An individual’s perception of travelling depends on the individual’s perception of the world, but is further determined by a range of external factors such as their childhood, family, work and the media, as well as wider societal and cultural influences.” Interestingly, all of these external factors play a significant part for each individual.

Within many Adventist societies and cultural influences the main focus of the spiritual journey is on building a personal relationship with Jesus. Ellen White makes a contributing Adventist statement: “Walk in Jesus’ footsteps, not by visiting where He lived, but by working as He worked — Among our workers are some who feel that a great object would be gained if their feet could tread the soil of old Jerusalem. But God’s cause and work will never be advanced by His workers wandering about

to find where Jesus travelled and wrought His miracles” (1995:224). This statement assumes that religious trips to the Holy Land focus on seeing and touching sacred artefacts not essential in building a personal relationship with Jesus or “working” as he did. This view is noted by Yaakov (1996:51) in a book review where Seventh-day Adventists are excluded as a religious group with a “messianic belief and literalist attitude towards the Bible . . . [and who] did not care much for the land of Israel.” Which then begs the question, why would a religious trip be of significance to an Adventist? In addition, how can a short ten-day Holy Land tour impact the spiritual journey of an Adventist individual?

### **Literature Review: Adventist Group Travel as Pilgrimage or Spiritual Parsimony?**

Aligned with the aim of this study, this review of the literature focuses on the concept of short-term faith-based group travel, as embedded in the overarching findings of travel and tourism as a whole. Up until recently, researchers had a particularly dim view of short term and group travel (Heitmann 2011:33). Increasingly there has been a shift in the researchers’ perceptions given an increasing popularity of short-term faith-based group and individual travel that has occurred since the turn of this current century, and a corresponding change of research understanding (Rountree 2002:476). However, Timothy and Olsen (2006:xiii) point out this is the least understood form of travel despite the pervasiveness of religious tourism and spiritual connections to a sense of commemorative places (Potter and Modlin 2015:1) or memory spaces (Hoelscher and Alderman 2004:349), relatively “few scholars have explored the multitudinous and multifarious relationships between religion, spirituality, and tourism” (Timothy and Olsen 2006:271).

Although the overall research focus related to travel is still in its comparative infancy, and bound by “positivist tradition” (Ryan 1997:x), two key aspects have begun to arise out of the research field that are vitally important, and frame this literature review. The first point is that there is growing recognition that the experience of travel as a whole is an extremely subjective experience (Gieryn 2000:465). Notwithstanding the complexity of this point, it would appear that such travel experiences are therefore mediated interactions, with any outcome the result of the intersection of psycho-social processes located at the very least between intersubjective cross currents of situated encounter, cultural perceptions, historical counterpoints, and ideological frameworks. Bremer has argued that while negative issues and concerns always arise in any travel experience, the previous points have the potential to produce “subjective agency” (2004:28). To

draw on, and summarize the work of Hollinshead and Suleman (2018:74), the term agency in this instance can also be defined as “reflexively developing plural knowabilities.”

While this notion of reflexive subjectivity appears to be the core of all positive travel experiences, the second, and intertwined point related to this notion is that it is becoming generally accepted that travel is an extremely social-emotional activity (Aziz 1987:259; Crouch 2013:579). In their seminal work on the travel experience, Turner (1973:214) and Turner and Turner (1978:13) believe religious travelers often experience “emotional liminality” or an in-between state of mind with the shift to a new place and the awareness of new ways of being. In essence tourists and religious travelers sense a new “emotional, interpretative and phenomenological dimension” (Leppakari and Griffin 2017:4). While initial culture shock (Milstein 2005:221) can be a component, McKenzie and Fitzsimmons (2010:50) found that in the five reactive stages to a new culture, this aspect can become a positive aspect if short-term travelers are supported through constant reflection and social emotional support by other group members.

Several researchers believe that this process of entering new understandings is similar to that of pilgrimage, others believe it is a deeply embedded natural awareness related to “spiritual development,” or what Costa, Quintela, and Mende (2015:21) have termed “spiritual balance.” While this may be the general experience for travelers as a whole, certainly for those embarking on a religious trip, this concept is particularly relevant. Over a decade ago, Bremer viewed religious travel experience in much the same way believing that these trips forced “place and identity to emerge together in a relationship of simultaneity” (2004:73-74). While space allows for only the briefest of summaries regarding this notion, suffice it to say that the collisions between an individual’s imagination, visual elements, social interactions, and memories have the potential to shift previous attributes related to self and the site of visitation so that there is a reflective refraction of personal narrative related to the transformation of personal meaning (Ratz and Milchalko 2011). Notwithstanding the complexity of this shift, Ratz and Milchalko (2011:344) further contend that religious travel adds to a participant’s sense of subjective well-being.

Specifically undertaking a tour to the Holy Land is termed a pilgrimage, as there is an emphasis on the subjective individual experience over the objective perspective (Collins-Kreiner 2010:442). Tours to popular religious centers are characterized by a combination of tourism and pilgrimage where the tourist seeks to identify with places of cultural and historical significance thereby linking the person’s expectations, experiences, and perceptions as their beliefs and worldview. Religious sites are some

of the most visited and appreciated destinations by tourists as well as by pilgrims (Nyaupane, Timothy, and Poudel 2015:343). People's experiences at sacred places will most likely be different based on their religious affiliation or lack thereof. "While journeying in a physical environment the pilgrim is also aware that s/he is observing and discovering the landscape of the soul, the emphasis being on finding the self and its linkage to the surroundings, the linkage between the spiritual invisible and the material visible" (Sharma 2013:23).

The tourist, who therefore opens themselves to the sacred power and embraces the landscape establishing rapport that is spiritually empowering, is on a pilgrimage. According to Kindsley (1998:235), "An underlying assumption of pilgrimage seems to be that the land cannot be intensely known and experienced from a distance; it can be fully known, its story deeply appreciated, only by travelling the land itself. . . . The experience can be lasting, transforming one's perspective permanently." The pilgrimage or sacred journey is "about self-transformation and the gaining of knowledge and status through contact with the extraordinary or sacred" (Collins-Kreiner 2010:443). It is not just a case of being in the place, but reflecting on previous understanding and experience in a highly personal way forming a sense of meaning and identity (Rose 2015).

This links directly with attitudes and preferences, which are based on cognitive appraisal, which each individual determines based on idiosyncrasies (Heiphetz, Spelke, Harris, and Banaji 2013:560). Interestingly, it is reported that individuals employ religious ideas to assist them in understanding other people, their families, and themselves (560). This means that the individual experience is based on religious commitments. These individual religious commitments are based on the experiences that are socially generated and relationally interpreted by each person. As such religion links with various elements of people's lives as a fundamental element of culture (Nyaupane, Timothy, and Poudel 2015:344) impacting upon dress, social and political views, food and drink, social attitudes and travel motivations and behaviors (344).

According to Shinde (2012:90) pilgrims need to talk about the tour and the land, recounting or writing about the landscape and the stories so that the narrative synergizes and allows the individuals to heighten their experiential sense. "Alongside time, space, journey, and motivation, mediation of these aspects by external agencies and context all become significant factors for the exploration of the travelers' engagement with the landscape" (91). At the level of the individual visitor, interpretation is claimed to be an important part of the visitor experience contributing to making a visit meaningful, interesting, and rewarding or enjoyable (Moscardo 2014:465).

## **Methodology: Framing the Focus**

The qualitative methodology implemented was that of collaborative auto-ethnographic, inside outside research where the researchers were participants, active collaborators and critical analysers undergoing transformative learning as part of this study and on their own personal life-journey. The researchers' experience was pivotal to this study and provided the data for analysis. Data were gathered by two of the researchers who were observing, taking notes, reflecting, interpreting, sharing, collaborating, and then representing their experience of a ten day tour of the Bible Lands. This was done by keeping an individual diary of their daily highlights and any other interesting aspects from each day. That means that the data collected was that constructed by the participant-researchers through their diaries and photographs taken during this tour.

As an auto-ethnographic study the data is written in the first person, with emotion and "self-consciousness as relational and institutional stories affected by history, social structure and culture" (Ellis and Bochner 2000:739). The purpose of conducting this research was to connect the personal to the cultural by placing "self," through the researchers, into the social context. This was achieved through a substantial analysis of the personal accounts of the writer as part of a group and/or culture and the process of explaining this to others who are not in the group and/or culture.

In order to understand the implications and individual experience of a Bible Lands tour it was important for the researchers to each have a first-hand encounter and to document their individual expectations, understanding, journey, thoughts and reflections of the process. One of the researchers had already been to the Bible Lands on a number of times and so it was decided that the two researchers, a husband and wife, who had never been would document their first tour. It was important in this data generating phase for the two researchers to uncover their ideology, prejudices, and tacit knowledge. This was achieved by keeping a diary and participating in retrospective sessions on their return with the other researcher. Reflexivity was an integral part of this research and required the researchers to discuss the data and reflect on what happened and why.

As this study has a subjective approach it was important to note pre-assumptions, pre-judgments and any other harbored prejudices by the three researchers. All three researchers are Adventists with an Adventist worldview. As part of the data analysis process it was important for the researchers to embark on a rendering by sharing through discussion, reflection, questioning and confirmation as an important element of the coding process. The element of the human as instrument as proposed by Guba and Lincoln (1989:175-176), was incorporated through the reflection,

sharing, discussion, and writing phases of the data analysis process. The researchers conducted debriefing sessions with intentional periods of reflection with follow-up opportunities on their return home. The research stories (Appendices A and B) were coded for themes and these were discussed and again reflected on. As a result the findings and discussion are presented below.

## Findings and Discussion

Throughout the stories six themes emerged: contextualizing through a visual perspective, deeper understanding with meaning, personal journey, prior to trip planning, tour group membership, and, unlike any other trip. These six themes encapsulate the two researchers' experience and journey through the Holy Land. Each of these themes are addressed below in the order that they emerged from the data.

### Contextualizing through a Visual Perspective

In the researcher stories both researchers refer to this theme seventeen times. The aspect of *being able to contextualize the surroundings as well as "experience" the feel and atmosphere* (Researcher 1) demonstrates the fact of physically being there and actually seeing and experiencing what they had read about. *I really felt like I was experiencing the Bible in a 3-dimensional perspective* (Researcher 1). Further to this, Researcher 2 added that, *The pictures in the Arthur Maxwell published series of Bible stories depict biblical Israel through the European lens of rolling green hills, lovely clean white sheep, people dressed in well-fitting garments with European features. The real Israel is quite different.* The experience of being there and "experiencing" what had been read about and linking everything to beliefs and *having a mental picture of what I saw* (Researcher 1) provides real-life confirmation and cultural realignment. Another reflection was that *Size and topography was another shock to the system* (Researcher 2). Memories have been realigned and by being there, a realigning has happened in regards to spatial orientation and where biblical stories are located and the whole perspective has been reoriented. This aligns with the 'spiritual balance' (Costa et al. 2015:2) and what Bremer (2004:3) referred to as the 'relationship of simultaneity' where there is a reflective refraction of the personal narrative contributing to transformative learning. These experiences are individual and subjective confirming prior research in this area (Kindsley 1998:235; Nyaupane et al. 2015:344; Sharma 2013:23). There has been an internal discourse and essentially a reframing of the spiritual in relation to the biblical narrative and understanding which in turn has contributed to spiritual reframing



and reforming of the persona. This aspect of understanding links directly with the next theme of deeper understanding with meaning.

### Deeper Understanding with Meaning

The researchers' stories show they are aware and have knowledge on topics but that throughout the tour this awareness and knowledge grew and value-added to their faith and spirituality. The researchers covered this theme seventeen times in their narratives reflecting on their own understandings. The Dead Sea swim experience had Researcher 1 contemplating oil. She also commented that *the biggest aspect for me throughout this trip was the amount of "me" that was invested in this trip and I did not realize the significance of seeing some of these sites and how they would impact on my spirituality* (Researcher 1). Researcher 2 also experienced this, *You gain an appreciation for why there was the custom of foot washing because walking in the dust with sandals on your feet they get very dirty very quickly*. Deeper understanding with meaning happened continuously across the Holy Land tour where Researcher 1 stated, *I have been able to build a better understanding and have a mental picture of what I saw*. The fact that this researcher had not contemplated the aspect of biblical sacrifice and *needing doves as part of this now makes so much more sense as to why they would need to farm and keep doves in caves and essentially underground where it is cooler and easier to manage*. The realization of this fact certainly shows a deeper understanding with meaning added for this individual.

Researcher 2 experienced a deeper understanding with meaning during the visit to the Garden Tomb where, *according to the guide, people were crucified at ground level so that people looked the convicted person in the eye and could read what their crimes were. The whole focus of a crucifixion was to humiliate the convicted person as well as create a very painful death. People could walk up to them and spit in their faces. They were nailed on the cross naked and exposed to all who walked past and so crucifixion sites were normally placed on the side of busy roads to maximize the exposure to the local population. Again this flies in the face of popular Christian culture which has the cross on a hill, with Jesus lifted up high off the ground. The very famous and moving hymn, the old Rugged Cross as an example has the words "on a hill far away."*

In this quote, the researcher/participant is questioning their prior understanding and value-adding to this with facts and evidence from what is being seen and explained. Throughout the Holy Land tour this type of experience was evident and a number of pre-conceived ideas were addressed and understanding and meaning were enhanced.

Further evidence of deeper understanding and meaning is shown when Researcher 2 stated, *I broke away from the group and sat by myself for a*

*while trying to imagine how David would have felt so many years ago as he was on the run from Saul. He would have lived in the caves I could see up against the hills.* This theme also appears in regards to Hezekiah's tunnel where Researcher 2 states, *This is a remarkable feat given they had no GPS guided equipment. One can only conclude that they had Divine guidance as they worked.* Again, this comment shows deeper understanding with meaning. This theme was also evident in the narrative when Researcher 2 stated, *A part of the trip that has become a highlight for me after the fact is the Mount of Olives. This geographical location played a very important role at the time of Jesus' departure. This was the place he left earth and this is the place he will return after the 1000 years. I have been reading the last chapters of The Great Controversy and in chapter 42, page 663, E. G. White states that Jesus will stand on the Mount of Olives before He and the saved enter the New Jerusalem. When I read that passage again it had so much more meaning to me because I had physically stood at the exact place and I want to be part of that group that enter the New Jerusalem with Him.*

Previous research (Collins-Kreiner 2010:443; Kindsley 1998:235; Rose 2015:1) confirms that the experience transforms a person's perspective permanently resulting in a lasting effect. The fact that the deeper understanding with meaning is still happening for the researcher/participant links directly with the next theme of personal journey.

### Personal Journey

There are eighteen references across the researcher stories that portray the theme of "personal journey." Researcher 1 stated that *as a Seventh-day Adventist Christian I have a number of beliefs and ways of thinking that are part of who I am and my faith-background.* And as such is already on a personal journey of faith. Both researchers embarked on the tour as Christians intending to see the Holy Land and visit the sites that Jesus visited. Researcher 1 states, *visiting the sites has assisted in changing how I visualize and connect with my faith experience. It is like the places I have visited are real and have meaning. I now understand the concept of personal experience so much more and the concept of being a witness, one who has seen, even though so many centuries later than the Bible times, it all counts into my spirituality and personal connection with my Savior.*

The concept of a personal journey shows the individual nature of the experience and how each person connects and makes meaning of the experience. This personal journey has continued since returning from the Holy Land tour as stated by Researcher 1. *Often while on the trip I did grumble about not having enough time to reflect but since returning home I have been able to use the tour experience and my continuing reflections for my own*

personal Bible study, sharing with my friends and family, in our small group Bible study, in this research project, and in preparation for sermons.

A personal journey is an on-going phenomenon as Researcher 1 shared some of her individual choices that also impacted on her personal experience during the tour: *During the tour I was following a read through the Bible in a year program as part of my personal Bible study time. And it was amazing how many of the tour days we actually visited sites that connected with my morning reading, for example, we visited Megiddo as I was reading about Elijah and King Ahab and how Elijah ran along the plain of Jezreel with King Ahab who was returning to his palace at Megiddo (Researcher 1).*

Interestingly, Researcher 2, who is also on a personal journey, shared some negative aspects he was experiencing and contemplating. *Something that I found particularly disturbing was how various religious groups have laid claim to parts of Israel and in particular parts of Jerusalem and how, still today, they use these sites for religious tourism, taking advantage of pilgrims who know no better.*

Following on from the above, not everything in a personal journey goes well initially as demonstrated by this comment. *There were a few sites on the itinerary I did wonder why we were going to visit them and even when we did visit them I still did not make any connections; however, on our return home and months later I have encountered these places in my Bible reading and am so glad that we did visit them (Researcher 1).* The Holy Land tour has continued to impact on the personal journey of the participants where Researcher 1 says, *I think for me since returning from this trip the experience has continued to impact my life through what I read and contextualize.* This shows that the Holy Land tour has continued to have an impact on the participants, which is still ongoing and contributing to transformative learning. Another theme, which emerged from the data, is that of “prior to trip planning.”

### Prior to Trip Planning

Although not as prolific as the other themes, this theme was referred to by both researchers nine times. Both participants have travelled overseas multiple times as Researcher 2 states. *I have travelled overseas before with our family and my wife who is a highly organized person, is generally our trip planner. With self-organized travel, you have to arrange all your own transport, venue tickets etc. On a tour, I discovered that this is all done for you and so all you do is get on the bus and soak in the experience.*

Researcher 1 supported the statement above by saying, *I was less stressed and could look at the itinerary prior to leaving and contemplate the places that we were to visit.* Having everything planned certainly made the preparation for the tour departure easier for the travelers. In addition the itinerary

was set and Researcher 1 added, *Prior to embarking on the trip I found myself thinking about the places we would visit and what I knew about them and there were a number of sites that already held significant appeal for me. As well as knowing about some of the sites, she says, there were some sites I had never heard of before like Mareesha and En Gedi, and so I did look these up on Google maps to orientate myself. Some of the listed sites were ones I had read about in the Bible.*

Another aspect of the prior to trip planning for the Holy Land tour was the fact that the travelers were asked to do some before travel reading. *Because this was a fully planned tour I had time before leaving on the trip to read books I had read before but this time with a specific focus in preparation for the itinerary . . . in preparation for the tour I spent time reading the “Desire of Ages,” the four gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) and the “Following Jesus” book (Researcher 1).*

This was not a pre-requisite but a recommendation as Researcher 2 states, *we were all given a book called “Following Jesus” and we were asked to read the “Desire of Ages” in preparation for the trip. I started reading these books but with my current work load I struggled to keep up and so I had not read the required readings prior to arriving in Israel.*

The whole prior to trip planning was a very relaxed and enjoyable aspect for the participants on this Holy Land tour. This theme is one not addressed in other research except in the aspect of prior knowledge or experience. For this trip it was intentional and planned. In addition to the “prior to trip planning,” the theme of “tour group membership” was an aspect not organized by the participants; however, this theme did affect their tour experience.

### Tour Group Membership

Interestingly, this theme was included eleven times in the researcher/participant stories. Clearly tour group membership was an important theme, which also included the tour guides. Both researcher/participants agreed and stated that, *we had two very capable guides, one secular guide and one Adventist guide (Researcher 1). The two guides complemented each other as one gave all the historical data and evidence and the other provided the biblical links often reading sections from the Bible prior to looking at a site or sharing from the Bible while at the site or when leaving a site (Researcher 1). Our local guide and bus driver sorted everything ably supported by our Australian Guide (Researcher 2).*

In addition to the tour guides, *there were 22 members in our tour group and it was a great group consisting of all Adventists from around Australia and the South Pacific representing various cultural backgrounds. There was also a mix of working backgrounds including technicians, educators, finance people, and theologians (Researcher 1).*

Researcher 2 adds to this saying, *our group consisted of 20 people [excluding the researcher/participants] some of whom I knew and others who were new acquaintances. Traditionally the Seventh-day Adventist Church send groups of ministers and teachers on Bible Lands Study Tours but this was the first time they sent a group of "non-front line" employees and so the group was made up of mainly people who held roles in administration, finance, information technology, academia, education administration, etc. While most of the group were located in Australia there were four members from the Island Field. I was one of two spouses on the tour both of whom were also employees of the Adventist Church but not sponsored by our respective employers.*

This establishes the dynamics of the tour group all having the same faith-base and worldview with some existing social and cultural connections. This was clearly articulated by Researcher 1. *There were no major personality clashes and everyone seemed to get along. And confirmed by Researcher 2. Add to this a very easygoing group who got on well with each other and you have the makings of an incredibly enjoyable trip. Effort was put into getting to know tour group members. For example, individuals on the trip spent time getting to know each other on the bus, while visiting sites or during meal times (Researcher 1).*

The fact that, *the group laughed together and shared by discussing and reflecting on what was being seen as we moved from site to site. There were many opportunities on the bus between sites to reflect on what had been seen and how it connected with our faith journey. People shared their personal reflections which encouraged more discussion and contemplation of our faith and understanding (Researcher 1).*

This enhanced the tour and added value. Researcher 1 summed it up well when she said, *The difference for me was travelling with a faith-based group who were interested in reflecting about the sites, for example, how obsessed Herod was in all his building endeavours and how this same obsession drove him to murder and protect himself by killing all the baby boys when Jesus was born. This theme links directly with the literature where support, constant reflection, and social emotional support from group members positively impacts the experience (McKenzie and Fitzsimmons 2010:47). This clearly made the trip "unlike any other trip" which is the final theme identified in the data.*

## Unlike Any Other Trip

This theme included the most number of references (20) by both researcher/participants and was clearly an important factor. Interestingly, both researcher/participants acknowledge that *Israel was not a high destination on my tourist travel list which was more about fun, relaxation, and seeing things to check off a list of places I had been to* (Researcher 1). *Normally I do not like travelling much but because I have an interest in the Bible Lands because of my Christian faith as well as my love for the tenacity of the Israeli nation, I told her that subject to my work schedule and approval from my employer I was definitely interested* (Researcher 2). These spouses had not considered a Holy Land tour as a high priority as, *I always saw visiting Israel as a negative pilgrimage, for example more focused on “touching things” and because my faith is about a personal relationship with Jesus I did not see the need for a so called pilgrimage to places* (Researcher 1).

There were some very specific differences for the researcher/participants that made this “unlike any other trip”:

- a spiritual journey—for example, *Interestingly, this whole pilgrimage experience has been quite a spiritual journey and definitely more of an internal journey rather than the external journey which is still continuing to take place* (Researcher 1).
- kept a reflective journal—for example, *I feel like my personal journey has been enriched because I have had to reflect and this reflexivity has forced me to consider each aspect of my journey and personal growth connection to my faith and spirituality through the sites and readings that I did and continue to do* (Researcher 1).
- traveled with a faith-based group *who were interested in reflection about the sites* (Researcher 1).
- read from the Bible while visiting the sites.
- since returning home the impact continues—for example, *I think for me since returning from this trip the experience has continued to impact my life through what I read and contextualize* (Researcher 1).

This theme was linked to all the other themes discussed above. The fact that a specific faith-base was shared by all the tourists in the group and that all were on a personal journey of faith and spirituality with the sites linked with Bible references created a positive environment for contextualization.

## **Conclusion**

There has been a significant impact on the two participants who took part in this research project. There is no doubt that this short-term travel to the Holy Land has resulted in transformative learning where both individuals experienced contextualizing through a visual perspective, which has enhanced and contributed to a deeper meaningful understanding of their personal and spiritual journey. The results show that the impact has been positive and that planning, group membership, and active engagement through reading and journaling have made this trip unlike any other. This study although limited to two related individuals from the same faith does present short-term travel to the Holy Land as a positive transformative learning experience with lasting impacts.

## APPENDIX A

### Researcher/Participant 1: Sherene's Story

This tour to Israel was unlike any trip I have done before because I did not have to plan the tour or book anything. For previous trips I have had to research accommodation and locations in order to ensure that public transport was available and within walking distance. I also had to previously research sites we wished to visit and plan the activities for the day as well as the length of time spent in each location. For this specific trip the itinerary and accommodation were all planned and my only role was to join the tour and pack my suitcase. As such I was less stressed and could look at the itinerary prior to leaving and contemplate the places that we were to visit. There were some sites I had never heard of before like Mareesha and En Gedi, and so I did look these up on Google maps to orientate myself. Some of the listed sites were ones I had read about in the Bible and I was excited about finally seeing them and experiencing the environment. I have grown up as an Adventist and have read *Uncle Arthur's Bible Stories* with all the beautiful illustrations of the Bible Lands multiple times. Because this was a fully planned tour I had time before leaving on the trip to read books I also read but this time with a specific focus in preparation for the itinerary. Israel was not a high destination on my tourist travel list which was more about fun, relaxation, and seeing things to check off a list of places I had been to. I always saw visiting Israel as a negative pilgrimage. For example, more focused on "touching things" and because my faith is about a personal relationship with Jesus I did not see the need for a so called pilgrimage to places, but the tour opportunity presented as a work trip and so I was excited to be able to go. Interestingly, this whole pilgrimage experience has been quite a spiritual journey and definitely more of an internal journey rather than the external journey which is still continuing to take place. As a Seventh-day Adventist Christian I have a number of beliefs and ways of thinking that are part of who I am and my faith-background. Together with this and in preparation for the tour I spent time reading the *Desire of Ages*, the four gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) and the *Following Jesus* book. The tour centred on "Following Jesus" and visiting the places where He travelled. During the tour I was following a read through the Bible in a year program as part of my personal Bible study time. And it was amazing how many of the tour days we actually visited sites that connected with my morning reading, for example, we visited Megiddo as I was reading about Elijah and King Ahab and how Elijah ran along the plain of Jezreel with King Ahab who was returning to his palace at Megiddo. Another example was when we



visited En Gedi and I was reading one of David's Psalms that was written while he hid at En Gedi. These reading connections happened each day and I was so inspired and learned so much more and was able to process the stories I had read in the morning throughout the day by being able to contextualize the surroundings as well as "experience" the feel and atmosphere. I really felt like I was experiencing the Bible in a 3-dimensional perspective. This was the first trip I did not have to organise anything but could relax and enjoy the experience while also being forced to reflect by keeping a journal of my experience for this research. Interestingly, I feel like my personal journey has been enriched because I have had to reflect and this reflexivity has forced me to consider each aspect of my journey and personal growth connection to my faith and spirituality through the sites and readings that I did and continue to do.

On the tour we did 56 sites in 10 days and it was very intense. We had two very capable guides, one secular guide and one Adventist guide. There were 22 members in our tour group and it was a great group consisting of all Adventists from around Australia and the South Pacific representing various cultural backgrounds. There was also a mix of working backgrounds including technicians, educators, finance people, and theologians. There were no major personality clashes and everyone seemed to get along. Individuals on the trip spent time getting to know each other on the bus, while visiting sites or during meal times. The group laughed together and shared by discussing and reflecting on what was being seen as we moved from site to site. There were many opportunities on the bus between sites to reflect on what had been seen and how it connected with our faith journey. People shared their personal reflections which encouraged more discussion and contemplation of our faith and understanding. The difference for me was travelling with a faith-based group who were interested in reflecting about the sites, for example, how obsessed Herod was in all his building endeavours and how this same obsession drove him to murder and protect himself by killing all the baby boys when Jesus was born.

The two guides complemented each other as one gave all the historical data and evidence and the other provided the biblical links often reading sections from the Bible prior to looking at a site or sharing from the Bible while at the site or when leaving a site. I have never done a trip where I have read from the Bible while visiting sites. In addition, this was the first trip where I have specifically kept a journal for the trip and not just a diary of what happened during the day. This process of journaling has been quite a different experience for me and I have found the process enriching as I have really been pushed to reflect on what I have seen and what it actually means to me and my journey. Often while on the trip I did grumble

about not having enough time to reflect but since returning home I have been able to use the tour experience and my continuing reflections for my own personal Bible study, sharing with my friends and family, in our small group Bible study, in this research project and in preparation for sermons. I think the process of reflective journaling has been one that I am continuing to implement and utilize through my personal journey and when revisiting the photos from the trip. In addition to this the reflective process has continued with this research projects as well as when connecting with people from the trip or others who have been on a trip to Israel.

There were places on the itinerary I was excited to be able to visit, for example, the Dead Sea and to swim in it, Masada, the Mount of Olives, Jerusalem, Jacob's Well and the Sea of Galilee. The other sites listed on the itinerary seemed reasonable and because I had never been to Israel before I thought the organizers must have included them for a reason. Prior to embarking on the trip I found myself thinking about the places we would visit and what I knew about them and there were a number of sites that already held significant appeal for me. The Dead Sea swim was a highlight for me and I thoroughly enjoyed the experience. I can still visualize the magazine pictures I cut out and glued into my scrapbook as a child of other tourists relaxing and reading while floating in the Dead Sea. I remember thinking that it was so "cool" to be able to do that. The experience was phenomenal and I expected the water to be salty. The two aspects I did not expect at my Dead Sea swim experience were the salt crystals around the edge and how hard and rough they are, hence the footwear we had to use, as well as the oil residue on your skin when you exit the water as every other swimming experience for me has not included oil. There are so many references to oil in the Bible that this "oil" experience now seems a plausible and logical personal experience; however, at the time I was not aware or prepared for it. This seemed to be a part of my personal journey each day on this Following Jesus tour. These types of unforeseen aspects continued to happen on a daily basis across the whole trip. Some of these aspects were positive and some were negative. One of the negative aspects on my personal journey was that I was so looking forward to seeing Jacob's Well but now don't remember the experience at all. I do have a photo of me sitting at the well looking very "dozy." A church has been constructed over the original well and you have to go into the basement to see the well. I am an allergy sufferer and unfortunately there is a lot of mold in that area and I react to mold and so I have no recollection of the much anticipated site which was extremely disappointing. So, although I physically was at the site, I really did not mentally participate in the experience. This site feels like a surreal aspect as I can remember how it smells but not how it looks. My reflections on this site revolve around why an outside well is now underground.

There were a few sites on the itinerary I did wonder why we were going to visit them and even when we did visit them I still did not make any connections; however, on our return home and months later I have encountered these places in my Bible reading and am so glad that we did visit them. For example, Mareesha was one of these sites and reading about how the people lived in Bible times and how they kept their water, etc. I have been able to build a better understanding and have a mental picture of what I saw. The whole process in the Bible of sacrifice and needing doves as part of this now makes so much more sense as to why they would need to farm and keep doves in caves and essentially underground where it is cooler and easier to manage.

Living in Australia where there is much land and space often our perception and expectation is that other countries also have large spaces. I also think that my vision was clouded in this aspect because of the fact that in Bible times people travelled on foot and the journeys took a long time. Travelling around Israel was fast and easy and places were nearby. I did not realise how close Bethlehem and Bethany were to Jerusalem. The fact that we could travel from Jerusalem to Masada, En Gedi, Quamram, the Dead Sea, Jericho and back to Jerusalem in a day while experiencing all those sites and fitting in a wilderness walk I felt was quite amazing. I always suspected that the distance between these places would be so vast and it would take days to cover; whereas in reality they are far away when on foot but not so far when travelling via modern transport. When reading the Bible journeys took weeks to complete whereas today in a bus these places are no longer a week's journey or more.

I think for me since returning from this trip the experience has continued to impact my life through what I read and contextualize. Visiting the sites has assisted in changing how I visualize and connect with my faith experience. It is like the places I have visited are real and have meaning. I now understand the concept of personal experience so much more and the concept of being a witness, one who has seen, even though so many centuries later than the Bible times, it all counts into my spirituality and personal connection with my Saviour. As I read in the Bible about Jesus being beside the Sea of Galilee, I can picture the sea and the countryside in that area. I have experienced the distances between the various towns and where they are located. There is so much physical evidence to support the reality of Jesus and the biblical stories recorded in my Bible. The archaeological findings and continuing discoveries in the Bible Lands continue to contribute to this. Besides the reality of the places factor and the physical evidence I also think that seeing what had been constructed as well as being able to contextualise and see the current culture of Israel has assisted me in understanding important cultural understandings that

seem so different from my world. The biggest aspect for me throughout this trip was the amount of “me” that was invested in this trip. I grew up a Christian and have read about the Holy Land my whole life but this was the first time I had been there. I did not realize the significance of seeing some of these sites and how they would impact on my spirituality.

## APPENDIX B

### Researcher/Participant 2: Paul’s Story

My wife called me at work one day in May 2017 to say that a place had come available on a Bible Lands Study Tour and that Avondale College, her employer, had offered her a place on the Study Tour. She was called to find out if that was something that we could fit into our schedule and budget. I had heard about the Bible Lands Study Tours from people who had previously attended and so I was very supportive of her going. She wanted to know if I wanted to join her. Normally I do not like travelling much but because I have an interest in the Bible Lands because of my Christian faith as well as my love for the tenacity of the Israeli nation, I told her that subject to my work schedule and approval from my employer I was definitely interested.

A few days later I was told that they had a place for me as well and so we were off to Israel to visit places that Jesus had frequented during His time on earth. We were all given a book called *Following Jesus* and we were asked to read the *Desire of Ages* preparation for the trip. I started reading these books but with my current work load I struggled to keep up and so I had not read the required readings prior to arriving in Israel.

Our part of the group, which included the Australian Tour Leader arrived in Israel on the morning of the June 11, 2017 instead of the night before due to delayed flights. This meant we got to the hotel mid-morning and after a quick shower we are in the bus and on the road. Our group consisted of 20 people some of whom I knew and others who were new acquaintances. Traditionally the Seventh-day Adventist Church send groups of ministers and teachers on Bible Lands Study Tours but this was the first time they sent a group of “non-front line” employees and so the group was made up of mainly people who held roles in administration, finance, information technology, academia, education administration, etc. While most of the group were located in Australia there were four members from the Island Field. I was one of two spouses on the tour both of whom were also employees of the Adventist Church but not sponsored by our respective employers.

This was my first group tour. I have travelled overseas before with our family and my wife who is a highly organized person, is generally our trip planner. With self-organized travel you have to arrange all you own transport, venue tickets, etc. On a tour I discovered that this is all done for you and so all you do is get on the bus and soak in the experience. Our local guide and bus driver sorted everything ably supported by our Australian Guide. Add to this a very easy going group who got on well with each other and you have the makings of an incredibly enjoyable trip. It was fast paced, we visited 56 sites in 10 days and on reflection it would have been nice to have a little time to ponder what we had seen, it was no overbearing and we got to see a real snapshot of where Jesus travelled.

I am of European descent and my exposure to the Bible and Bible stories is from a European and American perspective because most of the English Bible story books were written by American authors for an American audience. For example, growing up all the pictures of Jesus that I saw depicted him as European, when in reality he was Middle Eastern. The pictures in the Arthur Maxwell, an American author, published a series of *Bible Stories* which depict biblical Israel through that same European lens of rolling green hills, lovely clean white sheep, people dressed in well-fitting garments with European features. The real Israel is quite different and is a country of contrasts. We were told that if you wanted to be wealthy you went north and west of Jerusalem and if you wanted to get close to God you went south and east of Jerusalem. This is because the north is green and fertile while the south is arid and dry.

Size and topography was another shock to the system. I have lived in Africa and Australia with many wide-open spaces and great distances between towns. Israel is a very compact country, which makes a lot of sense given that Jesus walked everywhere and when he was not walking, he was on a boat in the Sea of Galilee. The country is very hilly, for example Jerusalem is 779 m above sea level and the Dead Sea is 417 m below sea level however the distance between the two is a mere 33.8 kilometers. Great if you are walking from Jerusalem to Jericho, not so great if you are going the other way. The country is very dry and has a very fine dust, which covers everything. You gain an appreciation for why there was the custom of foot washing because walking in the dust with sandals on your feet they get very dirty very quickly.

We walked through the old city in Jerusalem. While the current city is not exactly the same as Jesus' time, He was in the same location. The contrast between the different quarters of the city is stark. We normally entered the Damascus gate as our accommodation was near there and then walked through the Muslim quarter, which is noisy and dirty. By contrast the Jewish quarter is far more sedate and clean. Access to the Jewish

quarter is tightly controlled for security reasons. Israel is very cramped and people have built where ever there is space, and almost always their dwellings are multi story. There are cars and people everywhere. You can understand why there were great crowds following Jesus. People would have talked about him and due to the closeness of the communities word would have travelled very fast.

Something that I found particularly disturbing was how various religious groups have laid claim to parts of Israel and in particular parts of Jerusalem and how, still today, they use these sites for religious tourism taking advantage of pilgrims who know no better. Our Guide would explain for example how the different church groups would battle with each other over access to the Church of the Nativity. There are churches built over a number of alleged religious sites often without any historical or archaeological evidence to support the claims. I recently read a book on the history of Jerusalem and Christian Kings and Queens would have envoys and other religious figures bring back artefacts from Christ such as a sliver of wood from the Cross on which Jesus was crucified.

We travelled south to En Gedi, Masada, and the Dead Sea. It is a very hard place. Dry, hot, and dusty. The vegetation is very sparse except where there are springs and En Gedi is just such a place. There is a brook that runs down out of the hills and surrounding the water there is this green oasis surrounded by the desert. I broke away from the group and sat by myself for a while trying to imagine how David would have felt so many years ago as he was on the run from Saul. He would have lived in the caves I could see up against the hills.

Another fascinating discover for me was Hezekiah's tunnel dug during his reign (2 Kings 20:20) that is 533 meters long. The tunnel was required to protect the water source for Jerusalem. They started digging the tunnel through rock from two sides and they met exactly in the middle as they had planned. This is a remarkable feat given they had no GPS guided equipment. One can only conclude that they had Divine guidance as they worked.

A part of the trip that has become a highlight for me after the fact is the Mount of Olives. This geographical location played a very important role at the time of Jesus departure. This was the place he left earth and this is the place he will return after the 1000 years. I have been reading the last chapters of *The Great Controversy* and in chapter 42, page 663, E. G. White states that Jesus will stand on the Mount of Olives before He and the saved enter the New Jerusalem. When I read that passage again it had so much more meaning to me because I had physically stood at the exact place and I want to be part of that group that enter the New Jerusalem with Him.

One of the last places we visited was the Tomb Garden. The Guide explained to us how a Jewish stoning worked as well as Roman Crucifixion. According to the guide, people were crucified at ground level so that people to look the convicted person in the eye and could read what their crimes were. The whole focus of a crucifixion was to humiliate the convicted person as well as create a very painful death. People could walk up to them and spit in their faces. They were nailed on the cross naked and exposed to all who walked past and so crucifixion sites were normally placed on the side of busy roads to maximize the exposure to the local population. Again this flies in the face of popular Christian culture which has the cross on a hill, with Jesus lifted up high off the ground. The very famous and moving hymn, the old Rugged Cross as an example has the words "on a hill far away."

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