The Historical Jesus and the God of Metaphysics

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In the fall of 2015, St. John's Seminary gave me a one-semester sabbatical which I spent at the Tantur Ecumenical Institute in Jerusalem. Pope Paul VI provided the immediate impetus for the Tantur Institute, and entrusted the project to Fr. Ted Hesburgh of the University of Notre Dame. The Vatican purchased property in Jerusalem and leased it to Notre Dame in December, 1967. Due to the difficulties of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Institute itself did not open until 1972.

After landing in Tel Aviv on the hot and humid night of September 7, I took a shuttle to the institute. It was a tiring trip, and I was happy to arrive. Going to the Holy Land was for me the fulfillment of a life-long dream. There I saw many things that, until this fall, I had only read about. Tonight I'd like to tell you about them and how the visit challenged my faith – and about how I learned to take a special attitude – a "metaphysical" attitude – toward them.

First Impressions

On the first week of the Tantur program, my classmates and I were taken through the dividing wall, erected by the State of Israel, that separates Bethlehem from Jerusalem. Bethlehem is administered by the Palestinian Authority. Once the Israeli soldiers had scrutinized our documents and let us through the gate, we visited the town of Beit Zahur. This Palestinian Christian village, about a mile from Nazareth, is the home of the Shepherds' Field. At the birth of Jesus, the shepherds saw a "heavenly host praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest'" (Luke 2:14).

There, in the Shepherds' Field, is a chapel built into a cave. We learned that, in the time of Jesus, it was common for people to live in caves. St. Luke tells us that Mary gave birth to her son "and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn" (Luke 2:7). It was quite likely, our guide said, that Jesus was born in a cave, because that was where rural people often lived. The manger may have been in the inner part of the cave, where shepherds and farmers often guarded their animals.

In October my Tantur class took a five-day trip to Galilee. We stayed at the "Villa Nazareth" hotel. We made several excursions to the Sea of Galilee, about 35 miles away. On one occasion we visited the Church of the Multiplication. It is a beautiful chapel built above the ruins of a church that was constructed in the fifth century. At the foot of the altar we could see an ancient mosaic. It shows a basket of bread flanked by two fish. The mosaic recalls how Jesus blessed a few loaves and fish and was able to feed thousands who had come to hear him.

The Church of the Multiplication was built in 1982 in the traditional basilica style, and is maintained by the Benedictine Order. I was sorry to hear that on June 17, 2015,

the church was damaged by an arson attack committed by Jewish extremists. The extremists not only set the church on fire, but also spray-painted graffiti in Hebrew that read, "The false gods will be eliminated." Fortunately, Israeli officials caught the perpetrators, labeled them as terrorists, and indicted them for arson. We were still able to enjoy the serenity, mild temperatures, and the warm breezes that blew over the Sea of Galilee, but the attack cast a pall over the land of Jesus' ministry.

In November, our Tantur class walked down the Mount of Olives to the Kidron Valley that borders the eastern walls of Jerusalem's Old City. We retraced the route that pilgrims make on Palm Sunday. We started at the Church of Bethphage (פגי בית). There Jesus asked his disciples to find a donkey colt so that he might ride to Jerusalem, about two miles away, on the week before his death. Descending the Mount of Olives, we passed ancient groves of olive trees that have been cultivated for centuries.

We also visited the chapel known as "Dominus Flevit," the Latin words for "Jesus wept." The chapel commemorates the tears that Jesus shed as he looked on Jerusalem and predicted the destruction of the Temple and the dispersion of the Jewish people (Luke 19:37-42). The Dominus Flevit church sits rather high on the Mount of Olives. From it, one can look across the Kidron Valley and see the site of Solomon's Temple, destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD. Jews call that site the Temple Mount.

But that is not what the Muslims call it. They call it the Noble Sanctuary. From Dominus Flevit Church, looking across the Kidron Valley, one can see the Noble Sanctuary topped by the Muslim Dome of the Rock. Its golden dome covers the site where God tested Abraham. The Book of Genesis tells how God asked him to sacrifice his son. The site is precious to Jews and Muslims, not to mention Christians.

For the Jews, the Muslim Dome of the Rock stands where the Temple once was. Some Jews would say it stands where the Temple *ought* to be. The site should *not* be called the Noble Sanctuary, they feel, but should be called the Temple Mount. From this viewpoint, the Muslim Dome has usurped the Jewish Temple. There is tension between Jews and Muslims, both of whom view the site as uniquely theirs. I couldn't help but think of all the blood and tears shed through the centuries over that holy place, the Temple Mount which is also the Noble Sanctuary.

Historical Jesus

When I went to the Holy Land in September, I had assumed that I would learn about the historical Jesus. This is a term from theology that has come into special prominence over the past two centuries. The term "historical Jesus" refers, from the Catholic point of view, the Jesus whom we know from history. Historical Jesus research focuses on his humanity and on what we can learn about Jesus from history and the people of his time. Others, however, take an extreme view of the historical Jesus. In this radical view, Jesus was merely a man, not the divine Son. He was a mere man whom his followers turned into a God.[1]

[1] This was the argument of Alfred Loisy (1857-1940) who wrote, "Jesus came proclaiming the Kingdom, and what arrived was the Church." See Loisy's *The Gospel and the Church* (1903).

But most Protestant scholars (not to mention Catholics) are reluctant to adopt this extreme position. They hesitate to pit the "historical Jesus" against the Christ proclaimed in the New Testament.[2] They agree that the gospels are our primary source of information about Jesus. They mirror Christian faith. They were never meant to be scientifically neutral and they do not aspire to be the kind of objective reporting that we look for in journalism. The gospels proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ.

That being said, I was hoping – when I first arrived in Israel – for an encounter with the historical Jesus, at least in the way that that phrase is used by Catholics. I was hoping to discover the Jesus of history, or at least (in the words of Raymond Brown) "a tiny fraction of the detail and coloring of the actual Jesus."[3] This is the tiny fraction of the actual Jesus that we can gain from outside the pages of the Bible, by visiting the actual land of his birth and the places that he visited.

To my discomfort, however, I was frequently disappointed in my search. Often when I visited a site, I discovered that the connection between it and the Jesus of history was tenuous. To give an example, let us consider the places where Jesus was born and where he died. In Bethlehem we find the Church of the Nativity. The pilgrim visits it by bending low to enter what is called the "humility door." Once I entered the door, I straightened up and found myself in a large basilica. At the end of the nave there is a raised altar with many hanging lamp. There the Eastern Orthodox celebrate their Eucharist.

To the right of the altar, I bent low again and descended a half-dozen steps. Below the altar is a cave whose floor is paved with marble. There, set in the marble, is a 14-pointed silver star, illuminated by lamps. It marks the spot that tradition calls the birthplace of Jesus.

The Nativity Church was commissioned by Emperor Constantine and his mother Helena in 327. Sixty-eight years later, in 395, St. Jerome wrote about the site of the church. He said that it was, in the second century, "overshadowed" by a grove sacred to the pagan god Adonis.[4] This comment by St. Jerome has provoked much scholarly reflection. Why did Jerome say that the pagan grove "overshadowed" the site of the Nativity? Was there once tension between the pagan worshipers of Adonis and Christians in Nazareth, both of whom had claims to the site? No one really knows. But I reflected on how difficult it is, by means of archaeology, to discover the historical Jesus.

The Holy Sepulcher

Let me give a second example, that of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. The Holy Sepulcher marks the location of Jesus' crucifixion and burial. The church encompasses a rocky outcropping that tradition identifies with Golgotha. As I entered the enormous

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[2] In this they follow Martin Kähler (1835-1912), who in 1892 published *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic, Biblical Christ*.

[3] Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), p. 106.

[4] See St. Jerome, Epistle 58, quoted in Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *The Holy Land: An Archaeological Guide from Earliest Times to 1700*, second edition, revised and expanded (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 166.

church, I saw a flat marble stone that people were venerating. It is called the "stone of anointing" or of "unction." It recalls the anointing of Jesus' body for burial. As I looked, I could see priests or monks walking briskly through the church, swinging thurifers of incense. Sometimes the priests or monks were Franciscans. Other times they were Eastern Orthodox or clergy from other traditions. Care for the Holy Sepulcher is shared by the clergy of six different Christian churches. They do not always agree.

After seeing the stone of anointing (and still within the Holy Sepulcher Church), I climbed a steep and winding marble staircase. At the top is a Greek Orthodox chapel that pilgrims approached in a line. Beneath the altar is a round hole. It permits visitors to touch the rock below. Pilgrims were bending down at the altar. They reached down to touch the rock of Golgotha, the site of the crucifixion of Jesus. For many people, this is the holiest place in Christendom.

From the Golgotha chapel I descended by another staircase. It led me past more clergy – Copts or Ethiopians, I wasn't sure – who were overseeing the Holy Sepulcher. I came to a large church built during the Crusader era, decorated with icons in the Greek Orthodox style. But immediately before the doorway stood an enormous rotunda, flanked by columns that rise to a soot-darkened dome. There, under the dome, stands yet another and smaller chapel. It is the tomb monument, the site of the place where Joseph of Arimathea laid the body of the Lord. Pilgrims line up to enter it. Within the chapel monument we venerated the stone that was rolled against the entrance of the original tomb. I wanted to stay longer, but there were dozens in the line behind me, patiently waiting, who also wanted to enter.

After I left the Holy Sepulcher, and when I got back to my room at Tantur, I felt frustrated. The Holy Sepulcher memorializes the death and burial of Jesus, but I felt overwhelmed and confused by my experience. I had seen Byzantine architecture and crusader-era architecture, but I wanted to encounter the Jesus of history. In my room I consulted the archaeological guidebook written by Dominican Father Jerome Murphy-O'Connor. Entitled *The Holy Land*, it was first published in 1980, and has gone through many revisions and editions. In the book, Murphy-O'Connor expressed some of the frustration I felt. This is how he put it:

> One desires holiness, only to encounter a jealous possessiveness: the six groups of occupants [of the Holy Sepulcher] – Latin Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Armenians, Syrians, Copts, Ethiopians – watch one another suspiciously for any infringement of rights. The frailty of man is nowhere more apparent than here (43).

The jealousy and possessiveness of the guardians of the Holy Sepulcher were distracting. But there is a further question. Is the Holy Sepulcher really the exact locale of the crucifixion and burial of Jesus? The Church was begun by Constantine in the year 326 and dedicated nine years later. Is this truly the spot where Jesus died and was buried? Murphy-O'Connor would only say this much: "An affirmative answer carries a very high degree of probability" (44). In other words, it is *highly probable* (but not certain) that Jesus died and was buried where the Holy Sepulcher now stands. Once again, it is no easy matter, apart from the gospels, to encounter the historical Jesus.

The frustration I felt brings me to a question that now I would like to pose to you. It is about the importance of history to Christian faith. I had journeyed to the Holy Land hoping for an encounter with the historical Jesus. That hope motivated me to visit the historical sites, such as Bethlehem, Galilee, and Jerusalem. But my hopes were frustrated when the connection between the sites and Jesus' history was obscure or unclear.

Moreover, I was disturbed by the dividing wall that the State of Israel has erected to protect Jews from Palestinians. And on top of that, the jealousy or possessiveness of the Christians responsible for the sites connected with Jesus' life disturbed me. That same jealousy or possessiveness can be seen when Muslims and Jews clash over the right to the "Noble Sanctuary" or the "Temple Mount." So it was not always easy for me to find the historical Jesus in today's Holy Land. Now I invite you to turn to your neighbor and reflect with me. Our theme is the relation between the history of the Holy Land and our Christian faith. *Does the current situation in the Holy Land, marked by divisions within Christianity and divisions between Muslims and Jews, prevent us from encountering the Jesus of history?*

The Contribution of Metaphysics

Despite the distance between Jesus and the monuments to his life, one can still feel his spirit in the Holy Land. And despite the tensions among Jews, Christians and Muslims within this land, the land remains holy. But the holiness is not always easy to sense. And so in the time that remains this evening, I'd like to share with you an experience which taught me something about the historical Jesus.

It is a story about my visit to the West Bank city of Nablus last November 14. On that one day, I had an encounter with Judaism, with Islam and with Christianity. Nablus is the site of ancient Schechem, where the patriarch Jacob settled with his family after he returned from a years'-long sojourn in Haran. There in Nablus I also met Sheikh Zuhair Dubee, a Muslim prayer leader who preaches non-violent resistance against the State of Israel. And I stopped by Jacob's well, where Jesus met the Samaritan woman. In each of these encounters, I deepened my faith, but I also experienced frustrations and surprises.

In order to explain this, let me introduce a word from philosophy, the word metaphysics. This word goes back to Aristotle who a treatise on the subject. The word metaphysics means "beyond the physical." It refers to the world of the mind and the conscience, the world beyond what we can perceive through our physical senses. Metaphysics refers to those matters that we know by our intellect.

Consider the following example from the metaphysics of knowledge. Whenever we learn something, we must, first of all, be open to the knowledge. At some level we must be willing to receive it, even if the knowledge is unwelcome or unpleasant. In this initial act of knowing, we move out of ourselves (metaphysically speaking) and turn our attention to what is new. That is our first step.

Then, in a second metaphysical step, we return to ourselves. We assimilate, absorb, and interpret what we have learned. We have to make that new knowledge our own. And in fact the new knowledge becomes a part of us. We can reflect on it. In the act of reflection, our knowledge fuses with our very being. That is a third aspect of the

metaphysics of knowledge. We know ourselves in knowing something new. In learning something, we encounter ourselves. Our knowing, we can say, reveals our very being.

That gives you a little taste of metaphysical analysis. And with that brief introduction, let me tell you about my one-day trip to the city of Nablus on November 14. We set out from Jerusalem and drove for an hour, passing from Israeli territory through a checkpoint into the West Bank. Nablus is the site of the Old Testament Shechem, the place to which the Patriarch Jacob journeyed after he wrestled with God.

Tel Balata and Jacob. The Book of Genesis tells about the twins of Isaac by Rebekah, Esau and Jacob. Esau was older and would have been the first to inherit the property of Isaac. But the younger and cleverer twin, Jacob, offered Esau food when he was hungry, and Esau gave up his birthright for a bowl of soup (Gn. 25:29-34). Then, to add insult to injury, Jacob stole from Esau. He tricked his father, Isaac, into believing that he, Jacob, was actually Esau, Isaac's firstborn. The old man, fooled by the skins that Jacob wore over his arms, mistakenly took him for Esau, his older (and hairier) twin. Isaac blessed Jacob with the blessing intended for Esau, saying, "Be lord over your brothers, and may your mother's son bow down to you" (Gn. 27:29). In that way, Jacob supplanted his elder twin.

Jacob fled his brother's wrath to a northern territory. There he married and became wealthy. But years later, Jacob returned to Palestine. On the night before he was to meet Esau for the first time in years, Jacob wrestled with God. He grappled with God in the form of an angel, and would not let go until he received a blessing. God gave him the blessing, changing his name from Jacob to Israel. Then, on the following day, Jacob prepared to meet Esau. He sent him rich presents in the hope of winning the brother's favor. And Jacob succeeded. Esau treated him warmly and with courtesy, inviting Jacob to dwell with him in the land of Seir. But the clever Jacob, perhaps knowing that good relations with Esau might not last forever, begged off. Esau went to Seir. Jacob went on to Shechem, the very place where I was standing.

On the day of our visit, we went to the archaeological site Tel Balata, which is related to ancient Shechem. At the Tel I kept thinking of the patriarch Jacob, to whom God gave the name of Israel. Modern Israel links its recent origin to biblical history. For the State of Israel, the war of 1948 was like Joshua's conquest of Canaan, and the 1967 War was like the victories of ancient Israel over its enemies. I was struck, as I wandered the ruins of Tel Balata, by the moral character of Jacob or Israel, from whom the state took its name. It is not easy to draw a high-minded moral lesson from such an example.

Nablus and Sheikh Zuhair. After our visit to Tel Balata, we got back on the bus. It drove into downtown Nablus, and we stopped at a five-story apartment building. We had an appointment to meet Sheikh Zuhair Dubee, an Islamic prayer leader. The Sheikh invited us into his modest living room. He said that his parents, Palestinian Muslims, were forced out of the seaside city of Lod by Israeli soldiers in 1948. At that time his mother was pregnant with him. She and her husband traveled to Nablus, where the baby, young Zuhair, was born.

As a boy, he befriended Christian nuns who ran an orphanage in Nablus, not far from his home. Later, as a young man, he was active in the Palestinian resistance against Israel. He was captured and served a seven-year sentence in an Israeli prison. There he

took responsibility for leading his fellow Muslims in prayer. Upon his release, the Islamic authorities in Nablus recognized his moral leadership. They made him a *khattib* or prayer leader. And since that time, he has made interreligious cooperation with Christians a part of his ministry.

Sheikh Zuhair said that some Muslims dislike Martin Luther King's strategy of nonviolence. To them, nonviolence seems like weakness or the abandonment of the struggle against Israel. But that is not the way Sheikh Zuhair himself regards it. A nonviolent struggle, he said, is the only kind that will not escalate into ever-more-violent activity. It is a way of protesting the absorption of Palestinian land by the State of Israel. I was surprised and impressed by the Sheikh, and I wondered how representative he is of Muslim sentiment. I certainly hope he is.

Jacob's Well and the Samaritan Woman. Our final stop was at Jacob's well. In 1860, the site of Jacob's well was acquired by the Greek Orthodox. They built a church and dedicated it to St. Photina. This name means, "the luminous one." Photina is, for the Greek Orthodox, the name of the Samaritan woman from the Gospel of John.

Since the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, Jacob's well has been a site of contention between Christians and Jews. In 1979, a Zionist group visited the monastery near the Jacob's Well church. The Zionist group claimed that the well is a Jewish holy place. They demanded the removal of Christian icons. A week later, in November of 1979, the custodian of the well, a Greek Orthodox monk, was murdered. Thirty years later he was declared a saint. In today's church, I saw icons depicting the monk's death at the hands of hatchet-wielding murderers.

For us Christians, Jacob's well holds a special place as the scene of Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman. The Gospel of John tells us that Jesus arrived at the well at the sixth hour, that is, about noon. He asked a Samaritan woman for a drink from the well. She was surprised that a Jew would make such a request. Jesus said, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water" (Jn. 4:10). The living water, he told her, will become in her "spring of water welling up to eternal life" (4:14). She desired that living water, and asked him for it, thinking that it would save her the trouble of a daily trip to the well.

In the conversation that follows, she concluded that Jesus is a prophet. But she also sensed some discord between him and her. She attributed this to the fact that he is a Jew, and she a woman of Samaria. The Jews, she acknowledged, "say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship" (4:20). In other words, the Jerusalem Temple is the place where we encounter God, not Samaria.

But Jesus did not fully accept that distinction. He turned the discussion from a discussion of physical locale to a discussion about metaphysical things. Jesus said:

> The hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth for such the Father seeks to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth. (4:23-24)

Was this the "historical Jesus"? Were these the words he actually spoke? I do not know. But this much is clear. For Jesus, the location of worship does not matter. What does

matters are two words: spirit and truth. Spirit is a synonym for God. God is spirit. And genuine worship of God is worship "in spirit," that is, animated by God's Holy Spirit.

Jesus goes on to tell the Samaritan woman that true worshipers also worship in truth. It means of course, that true worshipers tell the truth. But it also means that they speak as people who are incorporated into Christ whom we know as the way, the truth, and life. We are incorporated into Christ in the sacrament of baptism. That is the meaning of Jesus' promise of living water. To be incorporated in him means that we share in his very life. It is the divine life that enables us to hear God's Word and speak it.

Not all of this went through my mind at the time. Instead, on the day of my visit, I was focused on Jacob's well itself. I descended to the well by a staircase under the altar. There, our guide actually let a bucket down into the well. It dropped 135 feet before the bucket splashed. We pulled it up and drank from it. But once I returned from Nablus, back to Jerusalem and my room at Tantur, I had a chance to reflect more deeply. That day I had seen many things – Tel Balata, Sheikh Zuhair, and Jacob's well – but I still had to make sense of them.

Conclusion

This is where metaphysics becomes important. It tells us that the things we see with our eyes, such as the city of Nablus, the Sheikh's living room, and the Church of St. Photina, are not the most important. They are the external reality. Their significance is hidden until we reflect. The same can be said about the historical Jesus, insofar as that means archaeological or material traces of him. Verifying the evidence is less important than hearing God's Word.

In experiencing the sites and sounds of my trip to Nablus, I "went out" of myself (metaphysically speaking) and opened myself to a new reality. I encountered many things. I met different people. I saw exotic sights. But after going out of myself, I had to return to myself. I had to discern, to analyze, to reflect, to synthesize, and make a judgment. This is the lesson of metaphysics. In the act of knowing we discover, not just things "out there," but our very selves, ourselves as the ones who know. I encountered, in my trip to Nablus, my own self, a being trying to make sense of what I had seen.

Ultimately, I encountered the being of God. I do not mean that had a vision or heard voices. But I recognized God's presence. I was thankful for God as the spirit that animated me. I heard God's Word as a voice speaking to my conscience. It led me to see beyond the ruins of Tel Balata, to hear the inner meaning of the story of Jacob. It is the story of a man who, for good and for evil, cheated his brother, and yet was blessed by God. Now I have a memory of a Muslim Sheikh who still proclaims, despite the violence he himself did and he himself suffered at the hands of Israelis, a hope for change that might come without violence.

And I heard, after tasting water of Jacob's well, the voice of Jesus in conversation with the Samaritan woman. It was the gospel Jesus, if not the historical Jesus. He told the woman that the *place* where we worship, the real estate that we hold, and the land that we occupy, are less important than the *way* that we worship. We are to serve God with honesty and faithfulness. We are to treat one another with generosity and respect. And we are to worship in spirit and truth.