

Tantur Ecumenical Institute

Newsletter

The Palace Fortress of Herodian

by
Tony Giglia

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- **Orthodox Odyssey** by *Keith Begg, Tantur, originally from Limerick, Ireland.*
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- **A Reflection for July** by *Sr. Elizabeth Donnan, originally from Australia, but living in Zambia.*



Herodian....A must see on anyone's visit to the Holy Land!



We drive along the road towards what is a relatively innocuous looking large hill/small mountain to what is allegedly Herod the Great's summer palace, the palace fortress of Herodian, located fifteen kilometres south of Jerusalem and five kilometres from Bethlehem. From a distance, there does not appear to be much to see. As we move closer to our destination, however, we begin to get an understanding of the significance and achievement that is Herodian.

The irony of driving past an Israeli Army base as we approach Herodian is not lost on any of our group.

Herodian was built by King Herod (the Great) in three years between 23 – 20 BCE. Herod is often referred to as "the great" as some type of recognition of the fact that he was responsible for other much visited historical and archaeological sites such as Masada, Caesarea Maritima and commencing the reconstruction of the Second Temple of Jerusalem in 20BCE. Herodian is unique in Herod's achievements in a number of ways. It is visible from a great distance rising sixty metres above the surrounding landscape and resembling a volcano. It is circular and has impenetrable double walls. The top third of the hillside has been artificially created above what was the existing hillside.

The combination of both palace and fortress provides a critical insight into the complex thinking of a complex man with all of the insecurities of a king whose rule was challenged from both within his own people and from outside forces. The fortifications are imposing and would have provided those defending the fortress with a strategic advantage. The site also serves as a monument to Herod's victory over the Hasmoneans and Parthians in 40BCE. The site comprises two distinct areas – the palace and fortress on the higher level – and the administrative buildings surrounding a pool on the lower level.

Perhaps the most amazing aspect of the whole development is the opulence and sophistication of what comprised the palace. In today's terms one could say that no expense was spared. It is the equivalent of the lavish surroundings associated with the mega wealthy, where no expense is spared to comfort and pamper them. The fact that Herodian is located in the Judean Desert did not deter Herod from having a large bathhouse with cold, warm and hot pools. The water for these pools was stored in vast cisterns hewn out of rock on the hillside. This would have been carried up by slaves but was also captured by clever engineering measures used to store rainwater. The hot water was heated by an underground steam system. This at a time when bathing was not common amongst most people. It is also an indication of the Roman habits taken on by Herod.

There are a number of thoughts that come to mind when encountering Herodian for the first time. Herod's complexities of personality, his insecurities and the threats that he faced have been well documented. I could not help but marvel at the ability of those who designed and imagined the facilities at Herodian. I am in awe of the engineering and construction achievements.

Orthodox Odyssey
by
Keith Begg

The only certified 100 % Orthodox Hotel I have ever stayed in. Where Kosher is King. A thoroughly enjoyable experience mind you!



Safed – In the beautiful Galilee region of Israel, awash with colour and vibrancy.



My partner in travel crime, Sr. Mary Gomolka enjoying a relaxing break in one of the many amazing eateries in the art colony



Having lived in the beautiful city of Jerusalem for almost 2 years now, the thing that still astounds me is that I have not once been able to strike up a conversation with one Hasidic or Haredi Jew. Despite my best efforts of lounging around the Wailing Wall, wandering through the streets of the Orthodox suburb of Mea Sharim, standing out like a sore thumb I might add, I have never quite succeeded with this feat. In Jerusalem you can't help seeing them elegantly pacing at speed through the Old City, transfixed, serious and always in a rush. Being a lover of travel I have always thought meeting the locals an essential component in visiting any country, so I was close to giving up, after all 2 years is a long time.

However, fate took an amazing turn in the form of the holiday Lag Ba'omer which according to the Talmud and Midrash marks the anniversary of the death of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, a Mishnaic sage. This event takes place every year on the 33rd day of the Counting of Omer, which occurs on the 18th day of the Hebrew month of Iyar. Confused? Well for mere mortals like me that equates to the 10th of May. Having never heard of the holiday or its significance I had booked to go to Safed a beautiful city in the North of Israel with my travel buddy from "Nun on a Visa Run" fame, Sr. M completely unaware of festivities that lay ahead. Boarding the bus in Jerusalem Central station I was amazed that every single person on the bus was Orthodox. While they were not overtly friendly to us "goyims" they were jovial and smiling, the first I had seen and many appeared decidedly happier than their peers left behind in Jerusalem. Traveling through the beautiful rustic countryside, with forested hill tops, vineyards and fields bursting with spring produce, more akin to Tuscany than this part of the world, the bus driver announced that we would have to change buses in the small hamlet of Meron before we took our onward journey to Safed. In this sleepy mountain village to the West of Safed we were met by thousands of Orthodox Jews singing, dancing and clapping in celebration of the great Rabbi Bar Yochai who is buried there. It was like Mardi Gras for Orthodox Jews with people descending on this town from all over the world. At this year's commemorations it was estimated that over 500,000 attended. So it was with great regret on my part that we left this pulsating atmosphere for the rather more sedate hill top city of Safed. I figured that I had missed a golden opportunity to converse with my first ever Orthodox at Meron and was a little disappointed. However Safed proved to be the icing on the cake, the Holy Grail for me. It is located 3,200 feet above sea level, the highest city in Israel in the mountains of the Upper Galilee. The magnificent views include the Golan Heights to the East, Mount Hermon and Lebanon to the North, majestic Mount Meron to the West and to the south lies the awe inspiring Sea of Galilee. Winding streets full of art galleries, jewelry shops and eateries dominate the town and greet the visitor. It was here that I spoke to my first Orthodox in a lovely Yemenite eatery in the artist colony. He preached about love, peace and harmony, which greatly surprised me to say the least. On the way back to our hotel we stumbled across an Orthodox party. Segregated of course with women on one side and the men on the other, we were warmly welcomed by our Orthodox hosts who offered us food and drink and danced the merry Hora around the table. At night Sr. M and I sat for dinner and watched the multitude of Orthodox walking slowly and happily through the winding streets of Safed.

After all, Lag Ba'omer is a time of *bonfires*, children's first haircuts, and a popular day for Orthodox Ashkenazi couples to get wed. The latter was evident by the many happy couples walking hand in hand through the enchanting streets of Safed. I had landed in an Orthodox utopia!

The Magic of Masada and Qumran

by
Dr. Ray Hawkins

Coming to Israel to take part in the Tantar Easter Programme was my first visit to the Holy Land. Aside from the sites of Jerusalem and Bethlehem..... Masada and Qumran were high on my list of 'must do' – and they didn't disappoint!

Despite seeing many photographs of Masada, as well as the film, nothing prepares you for how spectacular the site is, how impregnable it looks and how inhospitable is the surrounding countryside. I would have liked to walk the 'Snake Path' to the summit but there was insufficient time, however the 3 minute cable-car ride to the summit gave spectacular views – and the summit was simply awesome, the sheer size and the heat, 37°C, 'wow' was the most used word!

Time didn't permit a full exploration of the site but what we did see was amazing – the irrigation system to provide fresh water, the Bathhouse with some of the original plaster and decoration looking pristine, looking down on Herod's palace somehow clinging to the northern end of the plateau!

We all knew the story of this being where the Jews made their last stand against the Romans in 74AD – but being there and looking down on the outlines of the Roman siege camps surrounding Masada made you realise what it must have felt like for the Jews. They must have felt so secure until the Romans set up their camps and started building a ramp on the western side – then the realisation of their fate must have hit them, especially those who had escaped from the destruction of Jerusalem and the slaughter of its inhabitants. Josephus' account tells us that having breached the wall with their battering ram the Romans retired to rest until the following morning. On their return they found of around 1000 inhabitants all but 2 women and 5 children were already dead, killed by their own hands rather than face an unknown fate at the hands of the Romans! Whether or not Josephus' account is accurate it was certainly the end of the Jewish uprising.

Qumran was almost as impressive, I had heard so much about the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls it was brilliant to visit the site, although I must now make a return trip to go and see the actual scrolls! Again what was impressive was the scale of the site, the buildings, especially the refectory and scriptorium, and the irrigation system. The surrounding countryside looked almost as inhospitable as that around Masada and yet this was Community Centre of the Essenes.

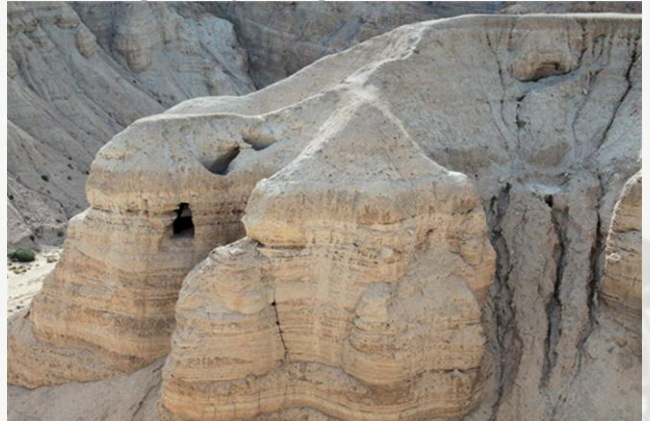
It is thought that the scrolls were part of the community's library hidden in the caves for safe keeping when the Roman army was approaching and expelled them in 68AD. It is amazing that the first scrolls were not discovered until 1947 when two Bedouin shepherds accidentally found a clay jar containing 7 scrolls in a cave. Subsequent excavations and exploration of 40 caves led to the discovery of fragments of over 100 copies of the books of the Hebrew Bible – the prize being a complete scroll of the book of Isaiah predating previous copies by 1000 years!

Both sites deserve much longer visits than we were able to make but perhaps next time ...!

Masada – View from cable car station showing the Snake Path and two of the Roman siege camps



Qumran – Cave where 15,000 fragments of scrolls were found in 1952 and pieced together to produce 530 different scrolls.



A Reflection for July by Sr. Elizabeth Donnan

I had a strong reaction to the article 'Sanguine in the face of a fraught future' written earlier this year in the Tablet, an international Catholic weekly. The author of the article, Emma Klein, a writer on Jewish affairs, was on a visit to Israel/Palestine from Britain. She described visiting four very different Israeli settler families living in the West Bank on Christmas Day 2011. As the title of the article would suggest she found these families cheerfully optimistic about the future. Ann Farr responded in the Letters section of the Tablet. She had been a volunteer with the World Council of Churches 'Ecumenical Accompaniment Program in Palestine and Israel'. She had seen fear and despondency as well as extraordinary resilience of the Palestinian families who live in the shadow of settlements. Ann made the suggestion that Emma visit Palestinian villages of the West Bank in the company of ecumenical companions or one of the Jewish peace groups, so that she can see that life is not sanguine there. But for the fact that I was exposed to the likes of the Bethlehem check point, Tent of Nations, EAPPI and Machsom Watch during the six week Tantur program this year, I would have probably taken Emma Klein's article at face value.

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