

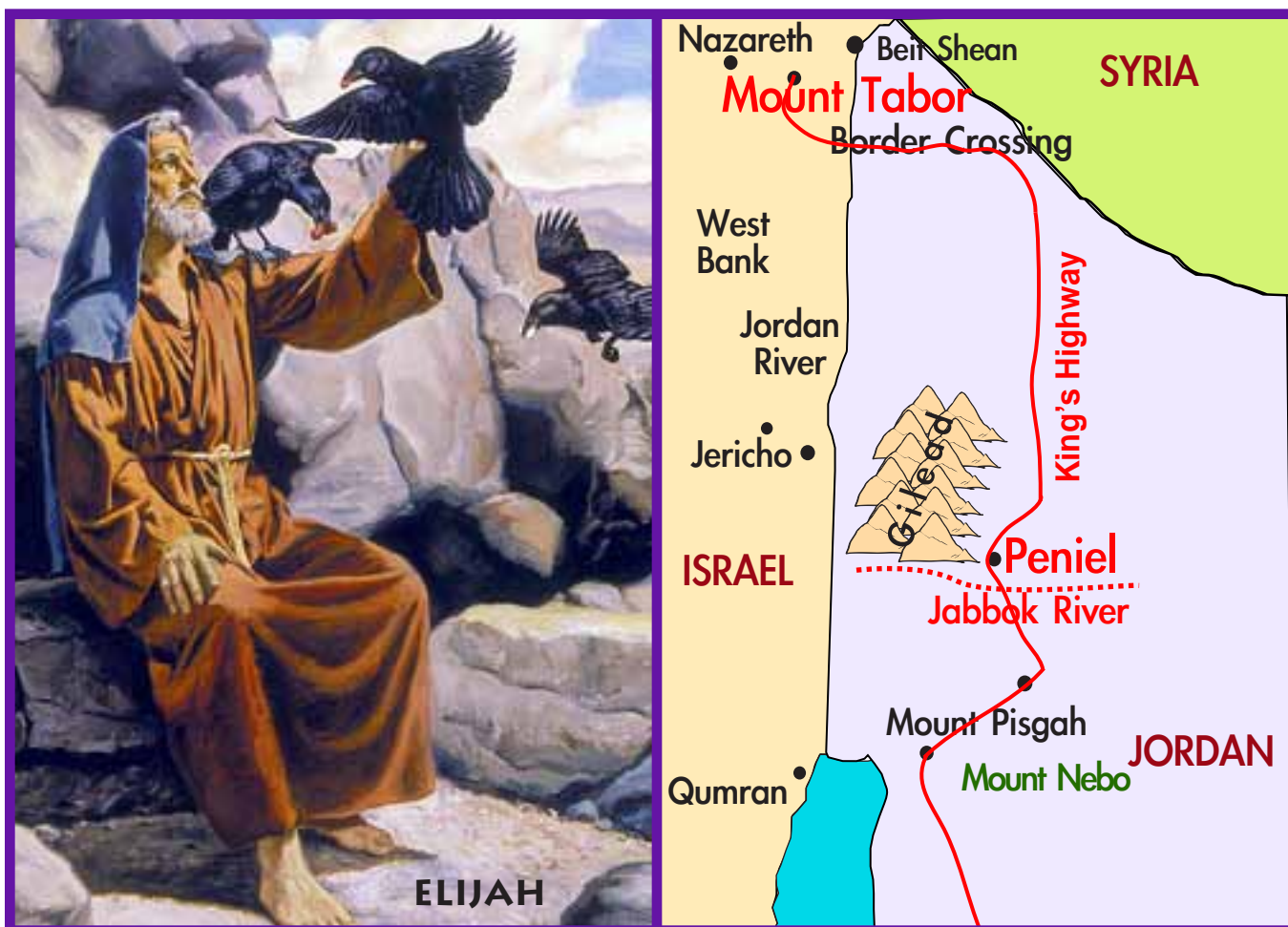
Tour of the Holy Lands - Peniel



The bus driver said, “Quick, stand up and look out the bus window. Now, look down.” We had to be fast or we’d miss it. We were passing over the Jordan River. Its water was muddy, but its shores were lush and green. Water has flowed down its path for thousands of years. If the river could talk, it would tell us many Bible stories. Right close by, Elijah hid for a year from wicked Queen Jezebel. We remember how he was fed by ravens. (I Kings 17:1-7) Just imagine! Now we can picture it.

Today, the Jordan River marks the border between the countries of Israel and Jordan. On the other side, we climb off the bus, line up, and wait our turn at a little window to get our passports stamped. Then we say goodbye to our Israeli guide and driver and climb onto a Jordanian bus with a Jordanian guide and driver.





We may have left Israel, but we haven't left the Holy Land. Many biblical stories happened on this side of the river. Elijah was called "the Tishbite" because he grew up in Tishbeh, a little town in the Gilead mountains just up to our left. (I Kings 17:1) David's favorite son, Absalom, got lost in the mountain forest nearby. (II Samuel 18:9)

We can't get lost. Most of the time, we'll be traveling south on the same road from here to the other end of the country, hearing familiar stories all the way. This road has been called the King's Highway ever since Old Testament times. And so, we head off on this next adventure.



It isn't long before we discover that we're on the same road that Abram and Sarai traveled as they entered Canaan for the first time. Canaan was an early name for the land of Israel. Originally, Abram had left Mesopotamia with other family members. The people there were highly educated, but they worshiped idols. First, Abram settled in modern-day Turkey in a town called Haran. (Genesis 11:31)

After about 25 years, something quite remarkable happened. Abram heard the voice of the Lord, who said, "Abram, I want you and your wife to pack up and go on a journey to a new land. That land will one day belong to you. You're going to be famous and the father of a great nation. And you will bless others." (Genesis 12:1-5)

So even though Abram and Sarai were now quite old, 75 and 65, Abram obeyed the voice, gathered his wife, their possessions and their herds, and left their home and other family members, not knowing where they were going. Would we ever move around like that, following a mysterious voice?



As we look out our bus window, we try to imagine this elderly couple and their family members walking towards an unknown land. Dressed in the clothes of Mesopotamia, they would stand out from the crowd. Arriving in the new land of Canaan, they will live in tents, moving from place to place, searching for fresh grass and water for their animals.





Many years pass. Abram, now renamed “Abraham” by God, has sent his trusted servant on this same road back to the family he left behind. The servant was to find a bride for his son, Isaac. It was the duty of parents in those days to find wives for their sons and husbands for their daughters. There were no available women among the Canaanites. Canaanites were idolaters, people who worshiped many gods. It was important to Abraham that his family continue to worship the one God who had led him to this land, the one God who promised him a large family, the one God who promised he would bless others. (Genesis 24:1-9)

Given such a special mission, Abraham did not send his servant empty-handed. The Bible tells us the servant traveled with 10 camels. We look out our windows and picture these huge, lumbering animals piled high with glittering colorful gifts—gold and silver jewelry, clothing, and other precious things to please this unknown bride and her family. The servant and Abraham had prayed that he would be guided by angels to find just the right bride for Isaac.

We wonder, did he find her?



Just look out the window again. We imagine the camel caravan returning. And yes, there she is - the bride, way up there on her camel, taller than our bus. Look how the camel makes her rock backward and forward. Beautiful Rebekah, dressed in her new jewelry, is on her way to meet her new husband. The story is so perfect, we know it must have been angels who found her.

The Bible tells us that the camels helped, too. (Genesis 24:10-60) When the servant reached the outskirts of the city, he made the camels kneel by the well just when the women came to fetch water. He prayed that he would recognize which one should be the bride by her kindness to him and his camels. He didn't even finish his prayer before she appeared and quickly offered water to them all. She was rewarded with a gold ring and bracelets. Both Rebekah and her family approved of the marriage offer. They also recognized it was the Lord who had brought them together.



We couldn't wait to read the end of this love story. Isaac was in the field at sunset and Rebekah was on her camel when they saw one another for the very first time at the very same moment. She leaped down and pulled her veil over her face, which was the custom for brides. They married and he loved her for the rest of his life. She brought him strength and comfort. (Genesis 24:61-67)

Is this the end of the Abraham family stories on this road?



No, in fact it might have been right here that Jacob, the son of Isaac and Rebekah, fled from his angry brother, Esau. Jacob deserved to be shut out of the family tent. Jacob, the quiet goat herder, was his mother's favorite, and his twin brother, the hunter, was the favorite of his father. But that was no excuse for Jacob to steal from his brother.

It all started before they were born, when the Lord predicted that the younger would rule over the older. Their names fit their personalities. The older, covered in red hair, was named "Esau," meaning "red." The younger, born with his hand on Esau's heel, as if he was trying to pull him back, was named "Jacob," meaning "Grabber."



When the twins grew up, it came time for Isaac to give the blessing to the older son. Rebekah remembered the Lord's promise, but she couldn't wait for Him to make it happen. She wanted the younger son to rule over the older right now. So, since Isaac's eyesight was poor, she decided to fool him by switching the boys. Instead of Esau cooking Isaac's favorite stew of deer meat, Rebekah cooked up some goat's meat flavored to taste like deer meat. Then she covered Jacob's arms and neck with an extra layer of hair. It worked. When Esau lost the blessing to his brother, he became so angry that he swore to kill Jacob. That's when Jacob fled those 500 miles to Haran. This story can be found in Genesis 25:19-28; 27:1-45.



My, this is a busy road! Who's coming now? It's Jacob, 20 years later! He's returning home to make peace with his brother. He must have been impelled by God because he is traveling with his entire family of wives, 11 sons and one daughter, and his large flocks and herds, all following the road south. The moment of reconciliation, which he has greatly feared, is coming soon.

As Jacob gets closer to Canaan, angels meet him on the road, staying with him until he feels at peace. They might have reminded him of the whole ladder of angels that said goodbye to him as he left Canaan by a different road so many years earlier. (Genesis 32:1; 28:10-22)



When Jacob saw the Jabbok River in the distance, he took his family and his animals down to the water's edge. Our bus driver does the same thing, pretending to follow him. We park and get out of the bus. We turn to our Bibles to find out what Jacob will do and what he will say and what he's thinking. It's been 20 years. He's worried. Does Esau still want to kill him? He sent messengers to Edom to find out.

We find Edom on our maps. It's way down at the bottom of the Dead Sea.

The report that came back made Jacob more frightened than ever. Esau was coming to meet him with 400 men. Jacob imagined all those bows and arrows aimed at him and his family. What should he do? (Genesis 32:3-6)



Jacob took 4 steps to protect his family. First he divided them into 2 groups. If Esau wiped out one, Jacob still had the other.



The second thing he did was to pray. “Dear Lord, you told me to return to my country and that you would be with me. I know I don't deserve your help, but I have all this family and possessions. Will you save me from the hand of my brother?”



The third thing he did was to gather up presents for his brother: 30 camels, 200 she goats, 20 he goats, 200 ewes (girl sheep), 20 rams (boy sheep), 10 bulls, 20 she-donkeys, and 10 colts. This generous gift would surely make Esau forget how much he hated him.



The fourth thing he did before dark was to send all of them across the river while he remained behind alone. (Genesis 32:7-23)

Good idea. It was getting crowded on this side of the river!



Jacob spent that night wrestling. With whom? Some say it was an angel, some say it was God, some say his own conscience. Of course, to our eyes Jacob was all alone on the river bank. The conversation was in his thinking. He was wrestling to defeat the man he used to be, the Grabber, the Schemer, the one who thought he could do everything all by himself, without God. Jacob won the wrestling match with the help of a power greater than himself.

His opponent asked him, “What is your name?” In Bible language that meant, what has your character been?

“My name is Jacob and my character has been a heel, a swindler.”

The answer came, “Well your real name, your real character has shown its true colors tonight. You will now be known as ‘Israel,’ a soldier, a winner over yourself.” What an important moment! Jacob named the spot where he stood, “Peniel,” which meant he had seen God face to face and lived.

We wonder, are we standing on Peniel? Can we see God face to face?

We wonder if Jacob may also have seen God’s image and likeness – not only himself, but his brother. (Genesis 32:24-30)

Now, we’re all asking, “Where's Esau?”



Jacob looked up and there was Esau with his 400 men. Jacob bowed 7 times. Esau ran to meet him and gave him a great big hug. The two wept for joy.

“What’s the meaning of all these people?,” asked Esau.

“They’re my family,” answered Jacob.

“What’s the meaning of all these animals?”

“They’re gifts to please you.”

Esau said, “I have plenty already and I don’t need anything more.”

Jacob said, “Oh, please take them. I’m so grateful. What a relief for me to see your smiling face. It’s like the face of God.” (Genesis 33:1-11)

We imagine Jacob smiling. He probably curled up peacefully and gratefully in his tent that night. As for us, we climb into our bus and head for a modern hotel in Amman, the capital of Jordan. What lessons we have learned today!

