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Christians should get to know Jesus in his native land

by Bill Tammeus

A small c catholic

On the day this column is to be posted, I am scheduled to be in Israel in the midst of a 10-day Jewish-Christian study tour I'm helping to lead with a rabbi and an Episcopal priest.

In fact, if you're reading this on April 18, that's the day we're to leave a kibbutz on the Sea of Galilee in the morning and visit such places as Capernaum and Baniyas, which is the source of the Jordan River.

There are several reasons I'm thrilled to return to the Holy Land. One is that I think we Christians should do whatever we can to help ourselves understand Jesus in his Jewish context. One way to accomplish that is to hang out in Israel for awhile.

But another reason is to try to understand a strange development on the fringes of Christian scholarship -- the claim that Jesus of Nazareth was not a real figure of history but, rather, a mythological character who was the product of the lively imaginations of some first-century Jews.

This bizarre movement of Jesus Deniers, as I like to call its members, strikes me as emanating from the same kind of fragile minds found in people who deny the Holocaust. Oh, clearly there is much, much more reliable historical evidence for the Shoah than there is for Jesus. But the conspiratorial stance that leads people to draw such baffling conclusions seems to originate in similarly dark alleys of the heart or mind.

I've recently read new books by two well-known, though nontraditional, Jesus scholars -- John Dominic Crossan (*The Power of Parable*) and Bart D. Ehrman (*Did Jesus Exist?*) -- in which they felt called upon to confront the Jesus Deniers directly.

Although Crossan argues that the Gospels tell essentially mythological stories, not history, he does write this: "I conclude that Jesus was an actual, factual, historical figure and not a metaphorical, symbolic or parabolic invention by his first-century Jewish contemporaries."

Ehrman, whose reputation in many ways is based on his writing about what he doesn't believe about Jesus, nonetheless concludes this in his book: "Whatever else you may think about Jesus, he certainly did exist."

I'm well aware that Israel is full of places alleged to be the exact spot where Jesus did this, that or the other, beginning with the precise spot of his birth in what is now the grotto of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem and ending with the precise spot of his crucifixion in what is now the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem.

And careful tourists and pilgrims will not get too caught up in such claims. Rather, wandering Israel is a way of getting a better feel for what life was like 2,000 years ago, when Jesus electrified crowds and frightened religious and political leaders by declaring the in-breaking reign, or kingdom, of God.

We Christians, in my experience, do a miserable job of understanding Jesus in his Jewish context. This leads us to dry out the bones of our faith, to suck much of the life out of the New Testament stories and to misunderstand a great deal about Jesus. (The book to read is *The Misunderstood Jew* by Amy-Jill Levine.)

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Perhaps if we Christians had done better with that context task over the years, we would not today be facing a semi-underground movement intent on denying that there ever was any Jesus of Nazareth. For an online example of this silliness, click here.

I hope in a future column or two to describe some of what I found in Israel and why it matters. But for now, let me just encourage you to consider making a Holy Land trip yourself. The better sense you have of the origins of our faith, the richer that faith can be.

Besides, if you meet Jesus Deniers, you can tell them you've seen exactly where he was born.

[Bill Tammeus, a Presbyterian elder and former award-winning Faith columnist for *The Kansas City Star*, writes the daily "Faith Matters" blog for *The Star's* website and a monthly column for *The Presbyterian Outlook*. His latest book, co-authored with Rabbi Jacques Cukierkorn, is *They Were Just People: Stories of Rescue in Poland During the Holocaust*. Email him at wtammeus@kc.rr.com.]

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