



The Half Shekel Journal by Ed Rice
Vol XII Day 6 Sun: Gideon Springs, Bet Alpha

We boarded the bus, filled from breakfast, and I was anticipating a surprise stop at Gideon Springs. Brian, the Christian Journeys coordinator, had asked me to be ready to preach at our Sunday service today and had mentioned an anticipated visit to the spring where the mighty man of valor, Gideon, had his 32,000 man army narrowed down to 300, so God's mighty hand would be visible, against the oppressive Mideonites. I had started the year preaching a sermon about possessing God's promised land and its application of a Christians possessing God's promised life. I have enjoyed the few times I have gotten to preach to preachers and found one does not need to fully develop the points of a message, just make them and move on. As the bus pulled into Gideon Springs, I was pondering the possibility of preaching from Joshua to Gideon since both Joshua and Judges started with approximately the same verse.



The rain increased as we went down the scenic trail to the spring where Gideon's men would have either bent to the knee or gone down to the belly to get a refreshing drink of water. I tried to visualize that just over the hill there were armies of Midionites thicker than grasshoppers and riding about on camels. God wants to fight our battles for us. He wants to hand us victories on a platter and watch enemies of our soul flee in total defeat. To often we would rather war against them in our own might or compromise and let the oppressive destructive habits of life hold us in bondage.

The sprinkle turned to rain as Ronnie gave us some ancillary details about the area and about Gideon. But for the rain it would have been an excellent location for a Sunday morning worship service. Bev and I had quietly worshiped already, but believers had been uniting with other believers on the day that Christ arose for 1,978 years now and we did not intend to make this one an exception. This Lord's day, however, was more in the hands of the agenda carefully, tactfully driven by our guide. Although I thought the early morningness of worship on the Lord's day more important than creature comfort and considered 1st thing in the morning more fitting than the 'convenience' of moving to a more convenient time, the leading of the wet masses outweighed a single preference and we headed for the bus. Bev and I wore an even coating of rain afforded by no umbrella. We each turned down several offers to share one, and I saw several dry left arms contrasting right arm soaked to the bone. Sharing umbrellas is not often practical and wet thanksgiving should accompany rain in a droughted land. We were driven to Beit Alpha to see another mosaic.

Two thousand years ago Israel was a tourist wonder of the world for three reasons. The synagogue at Beit Alpha was an apparent encroachment of compromise into one of those wonders. I had no idea how so, even as we viewed the ancient ruins at Beit Alpha. We were ushered into an enclosure which housed the mosaic floor of a sixth century synagogue. We spread out on the platform which encircled the mosaic and our guide asked us to observe, analyze, and think about the synagogue floor before us. We contemplated. I mused. I had just recently considered how little people think for themselves these days because we let every one else do our thinking for us. (Usually horrid liberals like Katie Couric or Ted Koppel) It was refreshing to ponder the floor before us. Beverly pointed out the child sacrifice in the lower right corner, I picked out the 12 signs of the Zodiac and neither of us could follow the apparent story line in the

mosaic before us. The drawings looked 3rd gradish and I couldn't comprehend the importance of this examination.

Our guide finally stated the obvious for us. After 70 years of Babylonian captivity the Jews had so learned the first and second commandment that there was no graven image or likeness of man or beast found anywhere in the land, and especially not in the temple or any synagogue. Yet here, in mosaic, in the floor of this 6th century synagogue lay the image and likeness of several, ... to include even the signs of the Zodiac. The story line was less sinister than Bev and I had imagined. The child sacrifice was actually supposed to depict Abraham's offering up Issac. The likeness of a ram caught in a thicket was pointed out. The angel who prevented Abraham's knife from its sacrifice was supposedly there. The servants left with the donkey were also depicted. Menorahs and a building with other creatures were poorly depicted on the other side but central was the pagan Zodiac rotated so Cancer rather than Aries was at the top. This rotation, and the counterclockwise depiction of the signs indicated either ignorance or purpose. It looked to me like the former.



The presence of the Zodiac in a Synagogue was especially amazing. The Zodiac was developed by Babylonian astronomers to denote the annual cycle stations along the apparent path of the Sun across the heavens through the constellations that divide the ecliptic into twelve equal zones of celestial longitude. Although the term Zodiac means 'circle of animals' the constellation assignments¹ were not all animals. Astrologers construed that movement of the naked eye planets² through the zodiac, called wandering stars, was a means of exploring and predicting what their gods were doing on Earth, even, eventually, imagining that the stars positions at ones birth determined their personalities and destinies. Such pagan polytheistic tomfoolery was now on display on a Synagogue floor... it also made its way into our society and is portrayed in every newspaper in our nation! Woe be to any Christian that falls for such anti-God paganism.



The tremendous compromise of this mosaic and the blundered Zodiac and poor quality of the art work was imaginatively portrayed as possible in a short interactive video. When I understood the enormity of the compromise that was made here I

feared that there was not enough made of the inclusion of images and paganism and too much made of the child like art that showed up on a Synagogue floor.

Beit Alpha was an interesting stop on our Lord's day in Israel. It illustrated how worldly compromise infiltrates our faith. Modernists welcome the compromise, expecting that Judaism had finally begun an 'evolution' and incorporate Grecian-Roman culture into its faith and practices. Lester Roloff, the great Texas, Independent Baptist preacher and founder of the Rebekah Home for Girls (1968) said "This world wants mixers, but God wants separators." He still does.

1 Aries, Taurus, Gemini, Cancer, Leo, Virgo, Libra, Scorpio, Sagittarius, Capricorn (us), Aquarius, Pisces

2 Wondering Star Planets visible with the naked eye are Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn