

Teesdale U3A - Monthly Meeting - May 2018

Professor Gerald Blake was the speaker at the May meeting. His topic was 'The surprising Geography of the Holy Land'.

Gerald began by describing the rich diversity of the landscape and of the plant and animal life as it was in biblical times. Much of that landscape has now changed. There have also been large changes in the population. It is estimated that in biblical times there were about 5 million living in the area which had reduced to about 700,000 after WW2.

The city of Jerusalem was at the centre of ancient trading highways which Gerald identified on one of his excellent maps and explained their importance. It is not coincidental that Jerusalem also appears at the centre of ancient maps eg the Mappa Mundi. It likely that there were about 1000 villages in Palestine connected to these routes and engaged in trade. However, Palestine was always surrounded by more powerful neighbours and found itself subject to frequent and violent attacks from outside. Jerusalem itself was considerably fortified yet changed hands about 37 times. The periods of 'peace and plenty' were only occasional.

Gerald described the 6 major geographical regions of Palestine showing the considerable variation in climate amongst them. The rainfall varies from 10 ins to 40 ins per year which all falls in the winter. Irrigation has always been a major issue and there are many references to wells in the bible. Even now there are thousands of bell shaped cisterns built into the ground. The Highland regions had extensive forests and there are many references to these in the bible but these have all but now disappeared. There are a number of possible reasons for this dramatic decline in forestation, eg the extensive use of timber by the Romans, the numerous nomadic invasions from about 640 AD, and in Ottoman times there were taxes on trees. In addition, much land was probably taken from the rural poor by large landowners. The land in Palestine has always been difficult to work, particularly in the summer. Also, there was a constant fear of wild animals and there were frequent swarms of locusts.

Gerald finished with a description of the picturesque area of Galilee. The inland lake was a hive of activity at the time of Jesus. There were 9 towns around the lake with a total estimated population of 100,000. Matthew was a customs officer there which would have been a responsible position. Fishing must have been big business with 24 varieties of fish in the lake. Perhaps some of the disciples were not just fishermen but were running fishing enterprises.

Throughout his superb talk, Gerald quoted beautiful excerpts from the bible and brought them to life by placing them in their geographical and environmental contexts. There were also many lithographs from David Roberts (1796 - 1864) whose images conveyed perfectly the landscapes of the Holy Land at that time. Those of us who have visited the Holy Land or thought we were familiar with the bible were left realising that there was a lot we did not know and that we might even be inspired to find out more.

The vote of thanks was given by Annie Clouston.

The next meeting will be held on June 28th when Professor Peter Redgrave will be speaking on 'Decisions, decisions, decisions. Where did free will go'? Peter is a retired neuroscientist.

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