

**Report on Travel to Israel, 8-23 July 2000
"Jewish and Christian Origins"**

**Office of International Programs
Division of Academic Affairs**

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Rebecca Moore and Risa Levitt Kohn received a grant from OIP for FY 2000-2001 to travel to Israel to investigate the possibility of establishing a travel/study opportunity for SDSU students. The purpose of the trip was to make the necessary contacts and arrangements to begin to set up a three-week course abroad in "Jewish and Christian Origins."

We traveled to Israel from 8-23 July 2000 to begin their investigation of the feasibility of such a program. The trip was extremely productive and quite fruitful in several respects: I) determining the content for such a course; II) making professional contacts for such a course; III) establishing a relationship with faculty and staff at a world-class archaeological excavation. It was also a lot of fun, and we have photos to prove it.

I) Course Content

The trip to Israel raised a number of logistical and substantive issues for our consideration. In terms of logistics we found ourselves discussing which geographical areas of Israel to include, as well as questions of travel arrangements, safety and security of students, costs, and guides. Israel requires that a licensed professional guide accompany all study tours, and it became apparent that such a guide would be quite valuable in explaining the details of various historical sites. Logistics relate to course content, however, and vice versa, because each tends to shape the

other. Where should we go? What should we see? How should such a course be structured? For example, after viewing an exhibit at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, it became apparent that students would need a quick background on the history of Judaism and Christianity for the tour to make sense. While Professors Kohn and Moore will be co-teaching a course on "Jewish and Christian Origins" in Spring 2001, it became clear on-site that it would not be possible to teach the course in exactly the same way because of the necessity of reducing the amount of travel time between locations. The historical time period the course covers might be extended in Israel to accommodate certain sites, such as the Byzantine and Talmudic periods in Christianity and Judaism. Visiting specific sites helped us to develop a "must-see" list to include on any study tours. They also raised the question of touring non-course related places, like the Dome of the Rock, or the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial, or religious pilgrimage sites. These were all issues that being on-site made clear.

II) Contacts Made

A priority of the trip was to make contacts with individuals who might assist in setting up such a study/tour. We met with Avren Goren, a professional tour guide who has led educational tour groups sponsored by Biblical Archaeology Review, a respected journal in religious studies. Mr. Goren provided numerous suggestions indicating that he understood the course content very well. He suggested making the tour more international, with inclusion of sites in Egypt and Jordan as well as in Israel, a suggestion which might make funding of the tours easier, but might also increase logistical problems.

We also met with university and other professionals on the trip. These included conversations with Rabbi Herbert Feder (Rabbi for the Conservative movement in Jerusalem); Professor Michael Cohen, Department of History, Bar-Ilan University; and Professor Jakob Klein, Head of the Bible Department at Bar-Ilan University. Each of these individuals suggested academics based in Israel who might be able to give lectures on different aspects of the course, such as synagogues in the Galilee, or Second Temple Judaism.

III) The Bethsaida Archeological Excavation

The high point of the trip was a day spent at the excavations occurring in Bethsaida, near the shore of Lake Kinneret (Sea of Galilee). The Project Director, Dr. Rami Arav, talked with us at length, as did the Project Coordinator, Wendy Chiarbos. We spent several hours at the site, ate lunch with the leaders, toured the museum at the Ginosar Kibbutz which houses a first-century fishing boat found at Lake Kinneret, and participated in the pottery reading at the end of the day. The involvement and participation of the students working on the site was impressive: each week they do a "show and tell" of their findings; they learn to identify pottery quickly; they listen to nightly lectures. In other words, the project includes students and their labor in a meaningful way. Our intention was to visit the site to see if we could include a day or two of archaeological digging on the study-tour, but the visit turned into something much larger, as discussed below.

The Future

We went to Israel planning to set up a study/tour for SDSU students, and that is still in the works. But we returned from Israel encouraged and ready to ask the Department of Religious Studies to become part of the Consortium of the Bethsaida Excavations Project. Joining the

consortium means the Department commits to taking groups of students to Bethsaida for three weeks every year to continue the on-going work of the dig. In return, the participating institutions have access to all of the materials the consortium has unearthed. Because the Bethsaida excavations are large, they cover many centuries of strata: from eighth century B.C.E. to the Roman period, and possibly beyond into the Byzantine period. This means that Dr. Kohn and Dr. Moore can work on primary research projects that interest them, and at the same time involve SDSU students in a study abroad program, for academic credit. It seems like an excellent marriage of teaching and research, and of being teacher-scholars at the same time. We have asked Department faculty to join the consortium, and have received initial approval, pending paying the \$2000 annual consortium fee.