

Destination Damascus

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In May the *Down Ancient Paths* Travel Study Program at Ambrose University College in Calgary featured a *Summer School in the Holy Land and Greater Holy Land* which took 32 participants and two Ambrose professors on a five-week educational odyssey through Syria, Jordan and Israel. Their first stop was the Syrian capital of Damascus, an oft conquered city in antiquity known to the patriarch Abraham, perhaps the world's oldest centre of continuous human habitation. This exotic city, an enduring witness to the numerous civilizations which have enveloped it throughout the millennia, is both an historic centre of Islamic culture and a World Heritage Site. As a sprawling oasis panoramically situated at the base of Mt. Qassioun, Damascus served as a nexus for caravans from the east and west travelling the Silk Road. Steeped in the folklore of the desert, the storied city took on a life of its own. It provided the setting for engaging conversation with a Canadian diplomat, robust interfaith dialogue with prominent Muslim clergy and academics and inspirational reflection on the pivotal events which transformed the life journey of the Apostle Paul.

Upon arrival, Professors Charles Nienkirchen and Paul Spilsbury, accompanied by the Secretary to the Mufti of Damascus, made their way to the Canadian Embassy for a private audience with Canada's Ambassador to Syria, The Honorable, Vice Admiral Glenn V. Davidson, CMM, CD and Charge d' Affaires, Emily King. After extending a congenial welcome, Ambassador Davidson quickly established an hospitable atmosphere for conversation with an opening allusion to William Dalrymple's celebrated travelogue, *From the Holy Mountain*. His affirming interest in *Down Ancient Paths* as an educational travel strategy for building bridges between west and east, ancient and modern, was keen. His passion for Canada having a strong cultural and diplomatic voice in the Middle East was evident. His assessment of recent political developments in the Middle East showed a deft discernment. The energetic and stimulating dialogue which developed navigated a broad range of subjects. It flowed effortlessly, exceeded the allotted time and concluded with an invitation by the ambassador for a return visit.

The day morphed into exploring the city's charming alleys and savouring the most prominent of its historical, cultural treasures which included the dazzling Umayyad Mosque (the onetime Basilica of John the Baptist) with its Minaret of Jesus, the sumptuous Azem Palace, the mausoleum of Saladin, the revered Muslim adversary of the Crusaders and the National Museum which boasts among its prized holdings Ugaritic texts of the world's first alphabet. In the late afternoon the group arrived at the Al-Fatih Islamic Institute in the core of the city where they were awaited by numerous scholars and students from the Institute for a discussion on Islam and the West. They were welcomed in a manner befitting of an international delegation. Among the hosts were Dr. Abdul Fattah al-Bizem, the Mufti of Damascus, and Sheikh Hussam al-Din Farfour, the Vice Rector of the Al-Fatih Institute and one of Syria's most distinguished scholars. The ever amicable interchange had its curious twists and turns as well as animated moments.

At the conclusion the scene shifted to the traditional Syrian home of Sheikh Farfour where sonorous Sufi chants were wafted into the night air by skilled musicians on drums and tambourines. An outdoor dinner sated with conversation ensued in a garden setting. It lasted till after midnight.

The following morning the group's focus shifted to Damascus as a strategic centre in the spread of the early Christian movement. They soaked in the elegant arabesque of the Old City while strolling the almost deserted, ancient Via Recta-the Straight Street mentioned in the New Testament (Acts 9:11), once the main axis of the Roman town. Several ancient traditions of the Christian East converge here. In the sacred silence of the Chapel of Ananias, supposedly constructed on the foundation of the original house of the biblical character, the dramatic climax of the Apostle Paul's conversion was stirringly recovered in the reading and contemplation of the New Testament account (Acts 9: 10-18).

Time evaporated and the narrative was soberly rehearsed in a subterranean cave-like setting. Misdirected in his religious zeal, Saul, later Paul, was an angry, determined persecutor of the adherents of The Way. He was however, abruptly halted, spiritually awakened and his sight seered by the brilliance of a midday theophany on the road to Damascus. In the centre of the city to which he was led in humiliation, his hubris was deflated, his worldview demolished and his life radically redefined and redirected through the courageous obedience of a local Christ-follower who was the instrument for a miraculous healing, baptism and infusion of spiritual power. His near death escape over the walls of the city in a basket, though a harbinger of his future sufferings, hardly anticipated the indelible mark he would leave on world history.

As for the group, they left Damascus much more peacefully and continued their travels in the treasure laden land of Cham - the voices of Ma'alula, Krak des Chevaliers, Aleppo, Palmyra and the Monasteries of Simeon the Stylite and Deir Mar Mousa, not to mention the Baghdad Café in the desert, beckoning them to come.

Dr. Nienkirchen is the Founder/Director of the award winning *Down Ancient Paths* Travel Study Program and will be conducting another *Summer School in the Holy Land* in May/2012. (see www.downancientpaths.com)