

“If you’ve ever wanted to go to Israel—or want to go again—*Rediscovering Israel* will transport you there. Seeing Israel through Middle Eastern eyes, through the cultural lens of Jesus’ world and His life, is absolutely transformative. I traveled to Israel with Kristi in 2019, and traveled again with her while reading this book. The pictures, descriptions, and details place you right there in the Land. People say that, after a pilgrimage to Israel, you never read the Bible in the same way again, and they’re right. But reading this book did that for me too. It brought the Living Word of God even more alive, and I’m forever grateful.”

—**Tamera Alexander**, *USA Today* bestselling author of *A Million Little Choices*

“My wife and I have had the privilege and honor of walking with Kristi McLelland for years. Since the beginning, we have been moved by her teaching and ability to break down God’s Word so that we can begin to grasp and understand the depth of God’s truth and love. A few years ago, we took the opportunity to go to Israel with Kristi, and we were truly stirred by how God used Kristi and the land of Israel to bring us into a deeper walk with Jesus. Kristi is a sincere servant of God who seeks to encourage believers in their pursuit of Christ. Gratefully, the teaching we received freely from Kristi is available to us all in written form. What a treasure.”

—**TobyMac**, contemporary Christian artist

“Kristi McLelland has an exceptional ability to make sense of the Scriptures from a Middle Eastern perspective. *Rediscovering Israel* is a user-friendly gem, tracing God’s redemptive plan, within the Land, from start to finish, never overlooking the primary plot of the story when she says, ‘...so that the world will bear witness to Him [Jesus].’ This is why our students crave Kristi’s teaching. I predict you will as well.”

—**Edward M. Smith**, president, Williamson College, Franklin, TN

“I have been waiting for a book from Kristi McLelland since the day I first heard her speak. This has surpassed anything I hoped for. Kristi’s ability to serve a complex meal in bite-sized morsels invites you into a most beautiful feast. From Genesis to Revelation, this book shows us Jesus in a way that can only leave us loving Him more.”

—**Melinda Doolittle**, recording artist

“This book provides priceless insights that will enhance, broaden, and deepen your appreciation of the Bible. Having traveled to the Holy Land on a team led by Kristi, I can confidently say that *Rediscovering Israel* is as close to that experience as I could have hoped for.”

—**Curtis Zackery**, pastor, author of *Soul Rest*

“Are you ready to have your mind explode and your heart expand at the same time? Beyond *education*, in reading *Rediscovering Israel* you will have an *encounter*. I cannot herald enough Kristi McLelland’s deep, contagious passion for the Scriptures and her rich Middle Eastern lens into the treasure of God’s Word from beginning to end. She has unearthed and strung together a gorgeous antique necklace of appetizing pearls (to use her metaphor) for us to feast upon. Weaving stories and history alongside archaeology, Kristi disciples us from anthropocentrism to Theocentrism: the world, the Plan, does not revolve around *me*, but around *God*. *Rediscovering Israel* will not leave you a *spectator*. It will *stretch* you to leave your preconceived intellectual borders, and it will *shift* you. ‘Jesus came to save us from our sins in order to send us into the world.’ A wholesome education through a Hebraic prism, yes; and even greater, a refreshing encounter with the Living God.”

—**Ken Alpren**, Sr. Rabbi, founder of Kol Dodi, Nashville, TN

“A few years ago, I was fortunate to go on a trip to Israel with Kristi McLelland. Right off the bat, I was blown away by her ability to teach and clarify the Scriptures. They came to life in a way that resonated deep within my soul, which only the Word of God can do. Kristi has a way of breaking down historical and cultural barriers of context to help us discover the deeper meanings of Bible texts.”

—**Michael Tait**, lead singer of Newsboys

“From Kristi’s teaching, I have learned so much about the world in which Jesus walked. Having lived my whole life in America, I read the Bible through a Western worldview. But when I was introduced to Kristi’s teaching, I began understanding the Word of God with a new lens. I can’t think of anyone better from whom to learn about Israel.”

—**Mandisa Lundley**, recording artist

REDISCOVERING ISRAEL

KRISTI McLELLAND



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To my parents James and Carolyn McLelland
for instilling within me a deep love
for the Word and for the Land.

Though neither of you ever made it to Israel,
a McLelland can surely be found in the Land.

My love to you both.





ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Taking adventures is an important part of living life, and the best adventures are the ones that find us—as *Rediscovering Israel* found me.

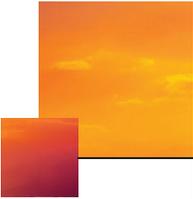
The best adventures are also those taken in community—in the fellowship of journeying together. It has been so meaningful to partner in this work with two people who love the Text in context as much as I do and who, too, have spent extensive time in the land of Israel. I am deeply grateful to Rebekah Joy for crafting years of my lectures, teachings, and experiences into an engaging and compelling narrative form that is the book you are now holding. This work has also been greatly enhanced and refined through Geoff Carroll's invaluable perspective and scholarly research.

The pictures in *Rediscovering Israel* are a combination of my and Rebekah Joy's experiences in the lands of the Bible, as well as the work of Killian Rose, a gifted photographer who beautifully captured locations in Israel. A picture is indeed worth a thousand words.

Thank you to Kathleen Kerr for opening this door and extending the initial invitation. . . as well as for loving *The Chronicles of Narnia* as much as I do!

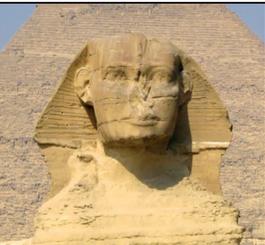
I am appreciative of the Harvest House family who has so warmly received me. Bob Hawkins, thank you for your leadership at Harvest House and for welcoming me to the table. Steve Miller, it has been an honor to work alongside you. Your expertise as senior editor coupled with your patience and kindness have been such a gift. Thanks to Sherrie Slopianka and Lindsay Lewis for paving the way for this book to be launched into the world. Special gratitude goes to Brad Moses, Kim Moore, Becky Miller, and Beth Hawkins for the roles each of you has had in bringing this work to life.

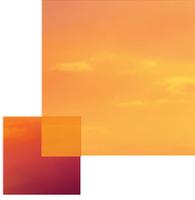
Finally, I am grateful beyond words for every person who has gone to Israel with me over the last fifteen years. Experiencing pilgrimage together will travel inside us for the rest of our lives. We can never unsee what we have seen. Thank you for praying this book into existence and for me in this process. I hope *Rediscovering Israel* inspires you to remember and relive your pilgrimage journey again and again.



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Kristi on a camel
her first time in
Egypt, with the Giza
pyramids in background



Kristi's first time praying at the Western Wall in Jerusalem



AN INVITATION TO FEAST ON THE BEST AND TRUEST STORY EVER TOLD

Hello, friend!

Life has a way of bringing opportunities for adventure; the best adventures are the ones that find us. An adventure found me in 2007 when a door opened for me to go study the Bible in Egypt and Israel. Little did I know that this adventure would change my life forever...that it would change *me* forever. I went to Israel and discovered that God is *better* than I ever knew.

Learning the biblical story in its original cultural context introduced me to an entirely different way of seeing, processing, and interpreting the Bible.



Kristi's first boat ride on the Sea of Galilee



Teaching at a sheepfold



In the copper mines at Timna Park in the southern wilderness of modern Israel

It's something I call the "Middle Eastern lens." For Westerners, taking off our Western cultural lens and putting on a Middle Eastern lens *adds* greatly to our understanding of what the biblical authors and characters—Middle Easterners living in a Middle Eastern cultural framework—meant by what they said and did. In the words of author, professor, and New Testament scholar



Looking out from Maktesh Ramon in the Wilderness of Paran

Gary M. Burge, “We have forgotten that we read the Bible as foreigners, as visitors who have traveled not only to a new geography, but to a new century. We are literary tourists who are deeply in need of a guide.”¹

I have the privilege of teaching the Bible in its historical, cultural, linguistic, and geographic context. It is my honor to serve you in this way through the following pages. I pray the living God will meet you at this biblical table and feed

you to the full. We are not orphans, and we are not fatherless. We do not have to scrounge through the Word of God to feed ourselves. We are sons and daughters with a good Father. We are invited to pull up our chairs to this biblical table and posture ourselves to receive the feast the Lord has prepared for each of us.

The Bible is not only the best Story that’s ever been written, it is also the truest! Every story within the Bible is like a pearl. What’s more beautiful than a single pearl is a *string* of pearls. As we journey through the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, we will do so through the Middle Eastern lens of Scripture, stringing together the pearls of this timeless, transformational Story!

All the best,
Kristi McLelland



ISRAEL: NAME. NATION. PLACE.

As we begin our journey through the biblical narrative, let's do so with the understanding that the first step in studying the Bible is not reading; the first step is prayer. Similar to how we pray before we eat food at our dinner tables, we want to pray before we eat the Word of God. The Jewish people primarily pray *after* they eat their meal, not before it.¹ When they say the blessing, they are not blessing the food; there is no such thing as a holy hot dog or sanctified salami!² Rather, they pray and *bless God* for providing the food. In that same spirit and posture, we want to bless God for providing the written Word for us. For giving us the Story of the Bible and inviting us to locate ourselves in it.

Two thousand years ago, Jesus gave the New Testament church what has become known as the Lord's Prayer, which has been a unifying agent for the Christian church, whether Catholic or Protestant. There is a Jewish prayer that is more than 1,000 years older than the Lord's Prayer. This Jewish prayer goes all the way back to Deuteronomy 6 and is called the Shema. *Shema* is the Hebrew word for "you hear." The Shema is a prayer of unification for the Jewish people. Then and now, Jews learn the Shema and pray this prayer at fixed times during the day. This is the first prayer Jesus would have learned growing up as a child; He would have recited it daily throughout His life. In

English, the Shema says, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (Deuteronomy 6:4-5).

The Jewish people believe that anytime we do the smallest thing to love God or love our neighbor, we cause the kingdom of God to come down to the ground. It is this prayer that reminds them of that. As you read the Shema in Hebrew, imagine Jesus walking down a road 2,000 years ago praying this with His disciples: *Sh'ma Yisra'el Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad. V'ahav'ta et Adonai Elohekha b'khol l'vav'kha, uv'khol naf'sh'kha, uv'khol m'odekha (D'varim 6:4-5).*

Jesus would recognize this in His language! We want to be a people who hear from the Lord, who lean in to who He is and what He is like. We want to be participants, not just spectators.

Receiving the Word of God

Pondering how we approach the Word of God, or our posture toward Scripture, is vital at the outset of our journey. This includes understanding distinctives between the West and the Middle East,³ which we will explore in depth in the next chapter. Every culture has nuances and values that set it apart from others. For example, in the West, we are more Greco-Roman than Hebraic. As a culture, we tend to be more like Aristotle, Socrates, and Plato than Jesus, Peter, or Paul in that we are more philosophical: Faith is what we *think* rather than what we *do*. Faith is a set of beliefs we cognitively know, more than a lifestyle we walk out—as it is for the Jews.

Let's look at our posture through the lens of Psalm 19, a psalm about the Word of God:

The law of the LORD is perfect,
refreshing the soul.
The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy,
making wise the *simple*.
The precepts of the LORD are right,
giving joy to the heart.

The commands of the LORD are radiant,
 giving light to the eyes. . .
 They are more precious than gold,
 than much pure gold;
 they are sweeter than honey,
 than honey from the honeycomb.⁴

Notice the word “simple.” Oftentimes we as Westerners define terms differently than the biblical world defined them. Don’t you want to know how God defines a word? I sure do! I also want to understand the meaning the biblical authors intended to convey in the words they wrote under the inspiration of the Spirit.

The word “simple” is a great example because in Western culture, someone who is simple is childish or not very smart. This same word sometimes carries a different meaning in the Hebrew, where “simple” can also mean “being open.” As it relates to our posture toward Scripture, to be simple is to be open or receptive when we come to the Word of God.⁵

Psalm 19 describes the Scriptures as being sweeter than honey from the comb.⁶ The Jewish people are visual, and they take God at His Word. When they read the Scriptures, they don’t passively philosophize about them; rather, they set out to do what they read. For instance, in Jewish preschools where Torah—the first five books of the Hebrew Bible or Christian Old Testament—is being taught to children, rabbis come to visit and, upon reading in Psalm 19 that the Scriptures are sweeter than honey, they pass around a small vat of honey, inviting the children to dip their pinkie finger into it and taste it. Then the rabbis will tell the children, “This is what the Word of God tastes like. You take it in, and it is good for you. You let it do its work.”⁷

Jewish people don’t so much view it as *reading* the Word of God; rather, they view it as *eating* the Word of God. They consume it.⁸ They let it do what it wants to do. The weekly Bible reading for Jewish people is called a *parashah*—translated as “portion” in English. Each day, Jews eat their *parashah*, their portion of the Word of God, by taking it in and allowing it

to do whatever is necessary inside of them. This posture is fundamentally different than approaching the Scriptures with a mindset that says we must dig something out to feed ourselves. That's the posture of an orphan, the fatherless, the one who has to contend for self.⁹ When we come to the Scriptures as sons and daughters, we recognize that God is inviting us to come ready to receive, to be fed.

I believe the best meals we can eat are the ones we don't have to cook! The Bible is a meal—a table of fellowship—prepared for us. We come postured to receive, to hear from the Lord, to *shema*, to take in everything God wants to say and then act upon it. There is a difference between leaning inward and going down compared to looking up and out. The latter keeps us buoyant, giving us vision and a gaze set upon the Lord. After all, if we stare at ourselves long enough, we'll get depressed!

The Bible was given for us to first eat communally, and to then let that inform us individually. We are hungry for the Word of God. We reject the scarcity mentality of an orphan. We posture ourselves to receive. We lean back. We look up. We open our mouths and our hearts wide to the living God. We want to be simple in the way Psalm 19:7 defines it: *open*. We want the cares of the world to fall away so we can be all in as we eat the Word. We want God to say and do as He desires.

A Journey of Discovery

Western and Middle Eastern educational systems and learning methods differ in many respects. Again, Westerners are more Greco-Roman than Hebraic. Western students tend to rely on a set of notes from their instructors, thus allowing them to have advanced ideas as to where lectures are headed. In comparison, rabbis teach through discovery. They take their *talmidim*, Hebrew for disciples, on a journey by opening the Text in such a way that its meanings become self-evident and settle into the heart.

We want to be a people on a journey of discovery rather than seeking only to acquire more knowledge. We want to receive revelation that comes from the Lord and is powerful enough to transform our lives from the inside out.



Questions to Consider

Perhaps the most important phase in building a house is that of constructing a solid foundation.¹⁰ As we set out on our journey through the metanarrative of the Bible, we will do so by answering a couple of key questions to anchor us and provide points of orientation and understanding.

Our first question: *Why that land?* When we think of Israel, when we consider the relatively small area known as the Holy Land, within the greater context of the entire globe, why did God choose for Jesus to be born in this piece of real estate? Why wasn't He born in the Far East? Why was wasn't He born in the Western Hemisphere? Why wasn't He born in some region of South America?

The modern State of Israel is quite small in comparison to her neighbors. When we locate this strip of land on a map both in ancient times and presently, we see that she is surrounded by other countries. Why did God see to it for Jesus to be born here? *Why that land?*

Our second foundational question is this: *Why that name?* Where does *Israel* come from? What does it mean? What are its implications? And how does it grow and mature throughout the Story of the Bible?

As we lay this foundation, we are going to discover the *geographical* and *spiritual* significance of the land in antiquity.

Geographical Significance of the Land

In Genesis 12, the Bible introduces us to a man known as Abram or Abraham in the West. In the Middle East, he is called Avram or Avraham, as *v* and *b* are the same letter in the Hebrew language.

To help us begin to recognize the geographical importance of the land in the days of the Bible, let's look at Genesis 12:1-3:

The LORD had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

Avram comes from a place called Ur of the Chaldeans. We will see throughout Scripture that geographic locations—*where* events happen—are key to understanding the Text. *Where* an incident occurs is just as important as *what happens* in the story line. With that in mind, we need to answer this question: Why does God move Avram from Ur of the Chaldeans to the land of Canaan?

If you are a Middle Easterner hearing this story, bells and whistles are going off because, in antiquity, your family—your clan, your tribe—is everything.¹¹ You never move away from them. You are born in a village. You grow up in that village. You eventually marry the boy or girl two tents down. Your families join. You have as many kids as you can because your kids are your social security. They farm your land and herd your livestock. You continue to join families within the village. Moving away is not a consideration.

Already in the biblical story, just twelve chapters in, God is revealing Himself to be a living God who does things in very unusual ways. He's writing a story that is quite different from what Avram knew. Which brings us back to our question. If moving away from one's family and tribe is so abnormal, why does God move Avram out of Ur of the Chaldeans and into the land of Canaan? Remember, we are discovering the *geographical* significance of the land.

In Avram's day, there was an important public road—referred to by today's scholars as the International Trunk Road or International Coastal Highway—that passed directly through the land of Canaan. God moves Avram from Ur of the Chaldeans to Canaan because He is placing him in the mix of humanity in this multicultural part of the world. Canaan serves as a land bridge connecting three different continents: Africa to the south, Europe to the northwest, and Asia to the east. The nations bring their commerce and trade through the International Coastal Highway. This provides insight as to why there were so many wars in this region in antiquity. It was not so much about control of the land; rather, whoever controlled the International Coastal Highway controlled worldwide trade. The Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and Romans were constantly fighting for this region; they wanted the highway.

This context helps us understand some biblical dynamics. Israel is a nation that starts out as a theocracy. *Theos* is Greek for “God.” God is Israel’s king, until the Israelites come to the prophet Samuel expressing their desire for a human king, like all the other nations around them.¹² Saul becomes the first monarch or king of Israel. David is the second; Solomon is the third.

Solomon achieves extraordinary wealth by controlling the International Coastal Highway. According to 1 Kings 9:15, Solomon built up three cities—Hazor, Megiddo, and Gezer—which served as tax stations along this trade route. Solomon could then implement shrewd taxation tactics. For example, if the Africans came through with 5,000 sheep, Solomon could allow them to pass via the highway, but they had to pay the tax—leaving 200 sheep with the king. When the Europeans brought their textiles and fabrics, Solomon allowed them to use the route as well, but required they leave twenty pounds of fabric as a tax. The same would have been true for the Asians coming through with their products; passage was permitted if they paid the tax.

Throughout the New Testament period, the Roman Empire is in power and has control of the International Coastal Highway. We see, for instance, Romans residing in an Israelite city called Capernaum, located along this key roadway. Matthew 8:5-13 details Jesus’ interaction with a Roman centurion in this city.

We are beginning to recognize a significant factor in understanding the Bible through a Middle Eastern lens. Oftentimes as Westerners, we are taught to read the Bible and ask, “What does it teach me about *me*?” We seek understanding and look for application. The Middle Eastern way is first and foremost to read the Bible and ask, “What does this teach me about *God*?” It is a completely different approach to the Scriptures. When reading the Bible with Middle Eastern eyes, we want to look for what each story shows us about who God is, what He is like, and what it means to know Him and walk with Him.

Perhaps you’ve heard it said that the number one rule in real estate is location, location, location. Throughout the biblical narrative, *where* something occurs is never happenstance. Location matters. Setting provides clues to the overall story. We learn much about God’s heart through His

decision to move Avram out of Ur of the Chaldeans and into Canaan, positioning him right alongside the International Coastal Highway.

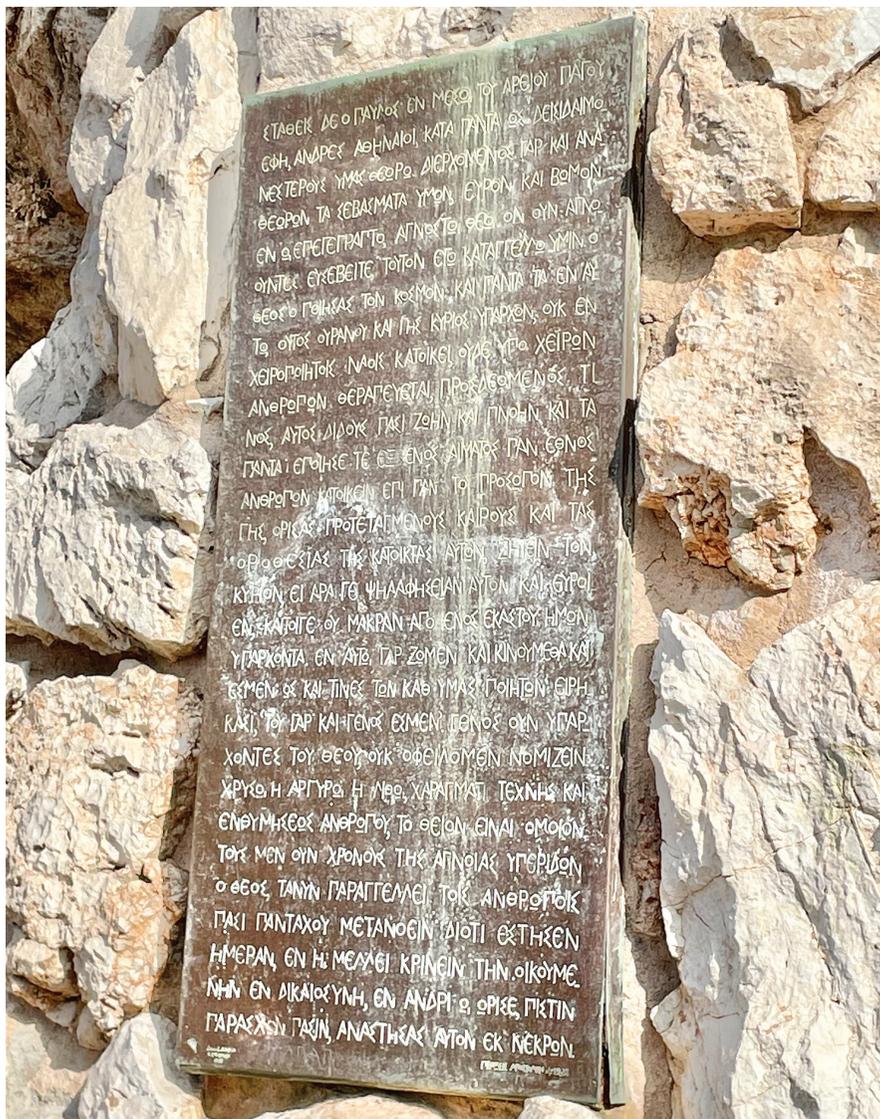
Spiritual Significance of the Land

Now that we better understand the geographical significance of the land, we're going to discover the *spiritual* implications of the land in Avram's day. An important cultural consideration is that names in the Middle East carry weight.¹³ Names indicate destiny—what a person is going to do, be, or embody. This is true about Avram, which means “exalted father.” *Av* means “father” and *ram* means “exalted/held high.” In Genesis 17, God changes Avram's name to Abraham or Abraham, meaning “father of many.” Over time, Abraham's name becomes a reality.

I heard a statement years ago in Israel that burned into my soul. It goes like this: “God meets His people exactly where they are; He never leaves them there.” So many of the biblical stories are about God coming and finding us, not about us having to go find God.¹⁴ Our role is to allow ourselves to be found and brought home by the living God. God comes to Avram and moves him out of all that is familiar, miles and miles away to a place called Canaan. God positions Avram along the land of the International Coastal Highway, and the question becomes, *Why?* What are we learning about the heart of God in this move in Genesis 12?

Our answer lies in Acts 17:24-27, some of the most poetic language in the New Testament and part of Paul's famous sermon on Mars Hill in Athens:

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us.



Paul's Areopagus/Mars Hill sermon at the Acropolis of Athens

I love when the Bible provides information and then tells us why it is doing so! Through this portion of Scripture, we discover that God has predetermined the exact times and places we will inhabit the earth. We are meant to live where we live and to know the people we know. Why? So that mankind might seek and find Him, though He is not far from us.

God moves Avram out of Ur into the land of Canaan. What is the *spiritual*

significance of him being positioned next to the International Coastal Highway? While Abraham is known as the father of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, he is also known as the first missionary. In the New Testament, missions involves being sent out, *going to* a place. I love to travel; I am built for it! Years ago, I worked for an organization in which my job was to take teams on international missions trips. As New Testament Christians, when we think of missions, we typically think of *going*. The Latin word *missio* means “sent/mission.” The Greek term is *apostolos* and the Hebrew *shalach*. All of these mean “sent/sent ones.”

We want to hang on to that while also understanding how missions works with Avram in the Old Testament. Rather than sending Avram to the nations, God positions Avram—a monotheist, or follower of one God—along the International Coastal Highway. Then He sends the nations to Avram. This is missions in reverse. Avram stays, and he and his descendants fill the land of Canaan. These descendants go on to demonstrate to the world what it looks like to be a tribe committed to justice and righteousness.¹⁵ They leave the corners of their fields unharvested so the poor and the stranger, the fatherless and the widow can find something to eat.¹⁶ They welcome the alien, the foreigner among them, because they remember what it was like being slaves in Egypt.¹⁷ They are meant to inhabit the land and display the kingdom of God ethic to the nations as they pass through the International Coastal Highway for commerce. Foreign nations are bearing witness to a holy people living under the rule and reign of a holy God. They demonstrate to the world what it is to know and walk with the living God.

Avram is called to inhabit space in proximity to the International Coastal Highway. He goes about his everyday life, routines, and responsibilities. As the Africans, Europeans, and Asians come through, they trade their goods while also hearing about the God of the Israelites. These polytheistic cultures are being exposed to the monotheistic idea that there is one God, not many. That’s not a bad road trip, is it? Making some money and going home with a revelation of the living God. This is missions in reverse: Instead of God sending people to the nations, God sends the nations to a people.

We need to continue traveling and serving international communities, offering support in ways they deem to be most beneficial. But understand this: The Bible is contending from the book of Genesis that God moves Avram out of Ur and positions him close to the International Coastal Highway because God’s heart has been missional from the beginning. And He’s not just coming for some; He’s coming for all. He wants all to know Him—through Avram, through his descendants, through the twelve tribes of Israel. God was and is reaching for the entire world.¹⁸

What Is Your Space?

Several years ago, a man from England moved into the house next to me. I wanted to be a good neighbor, so the day he was moving in, I went over and introduced myself. Here in the West, when we meet someone new, we tend to ask two questions: “What is your name?” And, “What do you do?” We often define each other by the latter. In the Middle East, when you strike up a conversation with a stranger, they don’t ask what you do until well into the conversation. They want to know your name and your family—who you are of, your tribe and people.

I introduced myself to my new neighbor, and of course he asked the two questions: “What is your name? What do you do?” At the time, I was on staff at a church and teaching Bible at a Christian college. To this day, I cannot be a covert Christian because my vocations are indicative of my faith! When I answered him, his response was visceral, as though I had told him I had leprosy. He was clearly not okay with my choice of professions.

I found out he was a self-professed atheist, had never been to church, and had a lot of opinions about Christians, God, and the Bible. We started living life as neighbors, and when you’re that close to a person, though you cannot know their story unless they tell you, you can observe patterns. I could see his striving and straining as he embraced a lifestyle of trying to find *shalom*—peace, wholeness, flourishing, and harmony—outside of God. Every once in a while we would talk, though he didn’t have a lot to say to me.

One night, he pulled in as I was sitting on my front patio. I will never

forget his slumped posture as he got out of his car—he looked like the weight of the world was on his shoulders. He saw me outside and—much to my surprise—came over and sat beside me. I looked at him and kindly asked, “Is it working for you? Are you about done? You look tired.” We sat there for the next hour as he told me his story, pouring out everything that was going on in his life. Nothing appeared to happen as we talked, but I knew he was listening. That encounter occurred years ago, but I’ll never forget it. He moved away about three months afterward, and I’ve not seen him since. I have no idea what his life is like or if he has come to faith in Jesus. But I do know that he heard—and I didn’t have to get on a plane and go to England. God brought England to me.

Sometime after that a family from India moved in across the street. One day I saw the father walk to their mailbox, so I suddenly felt the need to walk to my mailbox! I headed out to meet him. Sure enough, he asked me the two questions. I told him my name, and that I was on staff at a church and taught Bible at a Bible college. He replied to the latter by exclaiming, “Oh, you’re a monotheist!” I said, “Yes, I’m a Christian, a follower of Jesus! I am monotheistic in my faith and in my frame.”

He told me his family was from India. I asked if they were Hindu or Muslim, and he said they were practicing Hindus. “So, you’re polytheistic in your frame,” I acknowledged. He emphatically agreed: “That’s right! My whole family, we practice Hinduism.” Now I’m a little crazy sometimes, but he was friendly, and I felt like I could get away with this. “May I ask you a question?” I inquired, just to be safe. “Sure,” he replied. So, I went for it: “Do you get tired of keeping up with all of your gods?” I was thinking about the numerous gods in the Hindu Pantheon! My new neighbor didn’t miss a beat. He looked right back at me and said, “Isn’t it boring having just one?”

That fired me up! He could give it and take it, which intrigued me even more. I told him we needed to have dinner so we could talk further, which we did soon after. He and his wife invited me over and shared a lot about Hinduism. I love to learn; after all, a teacher is fundamentally a learner. I took notes as they talked. When I spoke, I didn’t discuss church history

or the Nicene Creed. I didn't talk about denominations or the difference between a Baptist and a Pentecostal. I shared with them about the person of Jesus, because we don't just follow a creed, we follow a man! He is the heart and essence of our faith. A few years later, that family moved away. I didn't have to get on a plane and go to India; God brought India to me.

The space I inhabit is my life. It's my daily interactions. It's the grocery store I frequent. God gave Avram specific space—his everyday life, lived along the International Coastal Highway. How about you? What is *your* space?

As the world watches us, as they witness the way we live our everyday lives, it should raise a curiosity in them about who the living God is and what He is like. One of my favorite seminary professors used to say, "Curiosity may kill the cat, but it leads men to Christ!"

Hovering. Down. Toward. In.

God is reaching for the nations, and we see it so beautifully as we track the Story of the Bible. From the very beginning, God has been systematically coming closer and closer. He has been moving toward us. In Genesis 1, the Spirit of God hovers over the waters.¹⁹ Next, God comes down and lives among His people in the desert; God had His own tent, called the Tabernacle.²⁰ Then, at the beginning of the New Testament, God moves toward us and takes on flesh; God incarnate lives among us.²¹ At Pentecost, when the church is birthed, the Holy Spirit comes and dwells within us.²² Notice the movement as God has been coming closer and closer: Hovering. Down. Toward. In.

The Bible doesn't say that we have to go find God. From beginning to end, the biblical narrative communicates that God is coming for us! The question is, Will we allow ourselves to be found and brought home? When we love someone who is struggling, we often pray desperate prayers like, "Lord, help them see the light! Please, let them come home! Help them know the truth!" I encourage us all to set aside those prayers. Rather than praying that they will come home, let's ask God to *go get them!* My mentor of twenty-five

years often said, “It’s a maybe prayer when you pray for someone to come home, because maybe they will and maybe they won’t. But a prayer you can pray all day every day, that you can rest assured God will answer, is a prayer for God to go get the lost!”

This shifts us from offering prayers of desperation to prayers anchored in expectancy. God is a God who comes and gets us when we are lost. That is who He is! God meets His people exactly where they are, but He refuses to leave them there. God brings us home. God is coming for everybody! Not just for the Jew, but for the Gentile as well. He has been missional since the beginning of the Story. I hope it comforts you to know that the living God is pursuing you!

Why That Name?

The next question we’re going to answer is, Why that name? Throughout Scripture, the term *Israel* travels. Initially, *Israel* is a name. Then, *Israel* is a nation. Finally, *Israel* becomes a place. Where is Israel first mentioned in the narrative of the Bible? As we discover the answer to this question, let’s remember that we are looking for the heart of God—that’s the Bible with a Middle Eastern lens.

When you introduce yourself to someone, you give them your name. As previously mentioned, in the Middle East, your name is your destiny, what you will embody. Jewish parents typically wait eight days after their son is born to name him.²³ They need to spend some time with their baby boy to discern his name. On the eighth day—the day the boy is to be circumcised—they have a naming ceremony with family and friends. If they are conservative, a rabbi usually comes and, along with the father, holds up the baby and declares his name. Everyone gets excited and they celebrate by eating a lot of food and sweets! I’ve had the chance to experience one of these ceremonies in Israel. Bestowing a name casts vision and sets direction; it offers clues as to who a person is and what he is going to be like.

God is referred to by many names throughout the Bible. What is interesting are the moments when God names Himself, as portrayed in Exodus 3. Moses, having fled from Egypt to Midian years prior, is on the far side of

the wilderness tending his father-in-law's flock. Scripture does not indicate that Moses knows the living God at this point. It is striking that Moses is not out in the desert looking for God; rather, God is out in the desert looking for Moses. Moses reaches Horeb, the mountain of God, and notices a bush that is on fire, but not burning up. When he moves toward the bush to take a closer look, the living God calls out to him and introduces Himself: "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob."²⁴ This phrase occurs more than once in the Bible.²⁵ Because names are so significant in the Middle East, we should be curious about the meanings of these names.

Avraham means "father of many"—he had a good name.²⁶ *Isaac* means "laughter" or "one who laughs"—another good name!²⁷ Jacob means "follower, heel snatcher"—an idiom for supplanter or deceiver.²⁸ In Hebrew, his name is *Ya'akov*, as the *J* and the *Y* are the same letter. We say Jesus, Hebrews say *Yeshua*. *Ya'akov* is *not* a good name.

Remember, a name is symbolic of one's destiny. How did *Ya'akov* get his name? What did he do at birth? *Ya'akov* was a twin. As his older brother Esau was being delivered, *Ya'akov* grabbed Esau's heel. He was greedy from birth. He wanted to be first. This is how Genesis introduces him. As his parents waited eight days to name him, they may have been saying, "He's a heel snatcher; he wants to be first."

Years later, when Isaac is aging and going blind, *Ya'akov* one day disguises himself to be Esau. Remember, *Ya'akov*'s name also means "deceiver." When *Ya'akov* approaches his father, Isaac asks, "Who is it?" or "Who are you?"—ways of asking, "What is your name?" *Ya'akov* replies: "I am Esau, your first-born." He tricks his father into giving him his older brother's birthright.²⁹ *Ya'akov* is living up to his name as a deceiver, heel snatcher, and supplanter.

With that context in mind, let's return to Exodus 3. The living God pursues Moses in the desert and can introduce Himself to Moses using any name He desires. It is critical for us to perceive this the way Moses would have. God knows that for Moses' culture, names are weighty. God meets Moses in his framework and introduces Himself in this way: "Moses, I am

the God of your fathers! I am the God of the *father of many*. I am the God of the *one who laughs*. And I am also the God of the *deceiver*—the swindler, the heel snatcher, the supplanter. I am coming for everyone.”

We are prone to watch our affiliations closely. If you or I were introducing ourselves to Moses, we would likely say, “I am the God of Abraham and Isaac,” while omitting Ya’akov. We would not want to be associated with that name. Yet God is unafraid to affiliate His name with Ya’akov because He knows He can change Ya’akov’s name. The first books of the Bible teach us that God is a name changer. This is key, because if your name is your destiny, when God changes your name, He is changing your destiny!

The questions then become, Will Ya’akov always be Ya’akov? Will he always be the deceiver? Is the script already written for him? Does he have hope of a better name, of a better life?

From Ya’akov to Israel

As we journey together, we will discover that biblical stories are like pearls. What’s more beautiful than an individual pearl is a strand of pearls strung together into a necklace. As we close out this first chapter, we are going to string some biblical pearls together, like a thread woven through a tapestry. Sometimes we view these stories as isolated and disconnected from one another, but we’re about to see how they are linked.

Let’s take another look at Ya’akov—this time in Genesis 32. Ya’akov wrestles with a man through the night. The man recognizes he cannot overpower Ya’akov, so he touches the socket of Ya’akov’s hip in such a way that Ya’akov walks with a limp from then on. The man tells Ya’akov to let him go, but Ya’akov replies, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.”³⁰

The last time Ya’akov was seeking out a blessing, it was from his father, Isaac.³¹ To get that blessing, Ya’akov lied about his name, claiming to be Esau. He used deception to take his older brother’s birthright. Genesis 32 is Ya’akov’s redo. The same scenario resurfaces for him as Ya’akov is once again in a moment where he is asking to be blessed. This helps us to better understand why the man asks Ya’akov, “What is your name?” The last time

Ya'akov requested a blessing and was asked to identify himself, he lied! This is Ya'akov's do-over, and this time, he answers with the truth.

We tend to read right over that. But if your name is your destiny, when Ya'akov tells the truth, he is, in essence, saying, "I'm a deceiver. I'm a heel snatcher. I'm a supplanter—that is who and what I am." Through a Middle Eastern ear, this sounds like a confession. Jacob is telling the truth about who he is.

If you ever need to know how God will deal with you in a moment, take note of what is happening here. Ya'akov has just told the truth. God is not afraid to affiliate with him because He knows He can change Ya'akov's name and give him a much better one. This interaction is where the biblical story introduces us to the word *Israel*, which began as the new name given to Ya'akov. The man Ya'akov has been wrestling with declares, "Your name will no longer be Ya'akov, but Israel." The literal meaning of *Israel* is "one who struggles with God." The deceiver becomes the overcomer in this moment. God takes Ya'akov's name and gives him a better one; transformation is underway.

There are only seven times in the entire Bible when God calls a person's name twice.³² Each time, He is about to radically change their life. One of these occasions happens in Exodus 3, when God calls out, "Moses, Moses!" I want God to call my name twice. Whatever your name is, whatever the truth is about who you are, whatever is going on in your life, God is not afraid to affiliate with you...to join His name with yours. He has the power to change your life. God always meets His people where they are; He absolutely refuses to leave them there. He meets Ya'akov right where he is; He refuses to leave him there. Ya'akov becomes Israel; the deceiver becomes the overcomer. He goes on to have twelve sons, known as the twelve tribes of Israel. Eventually, Israel becomes a place. Geography takes on the name of its inhabitants when the Israelites take over the land.

Jacob's Well is located in modern-day Nablus, a city known as Shechem or Sychar in biblical days. In the New Testament,³³ Jesus has a conversation with a Samaritan woman at this well named after a patriarch from the days of



Jacob's Well near the ancient city of Shechem (modern-day Nablus)

Genesis. Jacob's Well is very deep and has never run dry. The Bible is not only the best Story that has ever been written, but also the truest. These things happened!

God Comes Close

The living God has been missional from the very beginning. He meets us where we are, while refusing to leave us there. The Story of the Bible is God coming closer and closer to us. Hovering, down, toward, and in! The question is, Will we allow ourselves to be found by Him?

Before moving on, take a few minutes to consider this: What is your space? How has God planted and positioned you with where you live, with who you know, and with what you do?

In the next chapter, we are going to learn how to take off our Western lens and put on our Middle Eastern lens so we can approach the biblical text on its terms. If you've ever read the Bible and wondered what in the world it was talking about, there was likely some cultural nuance in motion.

God is better than we know; He is not afraid to affiliate with us. God is a name-changer; He changes our essence, our nature, who and what we are. Because of who God is, the redemption, restoration, and renewal of all things is underway. This is good news!