

Chapter Seven

Revealing Jesus Through Close Encounters in Far Places: How One Bible Lands Study Tour Impacted Christian Educators

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Abstract

The perceptions of educators who participated in a Bible lands study tour were investigated. Using a qualitative research model, participants shared their thoughts before the tour, during it, immediately after and again four years later. Interviews and observations during the tour recorded in-depth and general reactions to experiences. The literature indicates that visits to the Bible lands impact people spiritually. This investigation offers evidence that the participating educators on this study tour perceived spiritual and professional impacts as a result of the tour. They also perceived that after the tour, they were able to reveal Jesus and the biblical narrative with more authenticity, empathy, passion and insight.

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Prologue

It is early morning at Dubai International Airport. Amid the bustle, twenty-five Christian educators from Australia, New Zealand

and Papua New Guinea disembark from different flights and converge at one gate. In the group are strangers, colleagues and some long-time friends. There are tentative glances, introductions, reunions and laughter. For the next three weeks, this eclectic group of educators will share transport and accommodation as they wing and wheel their way across the Bible lands. The educators are diverse, not only in age and experience but in the current roles they hold. They come from primary, secondary and tertiary backgrounds. Some have spouses with them. Some are alone. They each have reasons for being there. Their hearts and heads hold questions. Will they find the answers? This chapter is the narrative of their expectations, their perceptions during the trip, what they anticipated on returning to their work and the realised impact of the Bible Lands Study Tour on their current roles as educators.

Travellers to Bible lands

This reported visit to the Bible lands was not unique. It was a group of people setting out on a journey of discovery. Many had travelled before them with a similar purpose. For the last millennium and beyond, people have been journeying to the Holy Land, as adherents to the Christian faith often call modern-day Israel (Chareyron, 2005; Kaelber, 2006). Hundreds and thousands of people visit the Bible lands every year, some individually but many in organised groups. Jerusalem is the most visited city in Israel and it is a city of influence and significance for three world religions: Christianity, Judaism and Islam (Feldman, 2014; Knott, 2010). This chapter focuses on those of a protestant Christian faith who journeyed to the Bible lands.

Globally, tourists travel for a variety of reasons, including adventure, seeking new experiences, relaxation or for health reasons. However, when it comes to the Bible lands, the literature identifies a pilgrim-tourist dichotomy that distinguishes between tourists who travel for personal reasons and pilgrims who travel for religious reasons (Feldman, 2014; Moscardo, 2014; Timothy & Olsen, 2006).

Pilgrims are faith adherents who travel a long distance to a sacred place as an act of devotion and faith. Feldman (2014) identifies these visitors to the Bible lands as devotees searching for holy places that will revive their faith as they become active participants in the retelling of

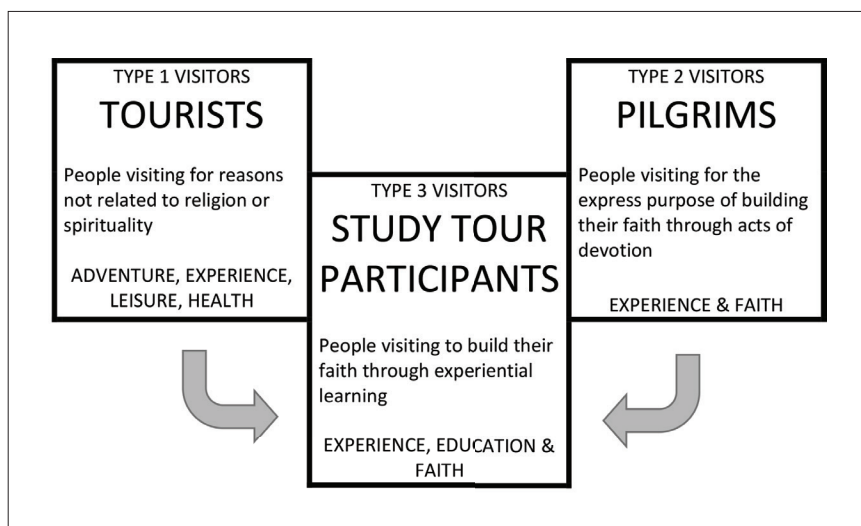
biblical narratives. For pilgrims, the journey is usually a very personal and profoundly emotional one. Their quest is to find sacred places (Feldman, 2014), and visits to sacred sites are accompanied by soul searching and sincere worship, which may or may not be visible to others. Visible forms of devotion include weeping, assuming a variety of prayer positions and rubbing personal items such as scarves across sacred sites. Pilgrims often seek a closer connection to Jesus through these actions (Chase, 2018). While Jerusalem is the most popular destination for those who wish to connect with Jesus Christ, pilgrims also queue at other sacred sites, including Bethlehem, the proposed sites of Jesus's baptism on the Jordan River and more distant places such as Rome.

Despite the relatively broad definition of a pilgrim, there are visitors to the Bible lands who disclaim the title of either pilgrim or tourist. Cohen (2006) presents this type of religious tourism as an educational experience. These visitors take an alternative approach to traditional pilgrimage, desiring to visit the Bible lands with what Knott (2010) calls 'a social constructivist approach' (p. 37), where learning occurs in a social context through interaction with people and places in an attempt to make meaning. These visitors view themselves as more focused on the spiritual aspects of their travels than a tourist is, and more focused on the educational aspects of their travels than a pilgrim is. This contextual education may connect faith and biblical narratives from a visual perspective, which extends beyond sacred sites to ordinary places that realign their understanding of familiar stories (Hattingh et al., 2019; Reynaud & French, 2017). Brown et al. (2019) agree, noting that this approach shifts the focus from sacred sites to sacred stories. This distinction between sites and stories is important as sacred sites remain where people find them, but sacred stories have the potential to lodge in the heart and become travelling companions. The contextualising of stories may facilitate the sharing that Truscott (2010) describes of her personal experience with one Bible Lands Study Tour (BLST), after which she felt able to infuse new life and authenticity into her biblical studies classes. Sacred sites, however, play a role in experiential learning, for sites are conduits that connect prior knowledge to present realities. Reynaud and French (2017) report that visiting various sites on BLSTs has the potential to bring Bible stories to life, revive Bible reading and correct previously held misconceptions.

Group study tours offer a different dynamic to solo trips. Some researchers (e.g. Brown et al., 2019; Cohen, 2006) posit that interpersonal connections develop between fellow travellers on a study tour and may act as a symbiotic relationship where the social element and the spiritual element interact in a way which reinforces both. This idea has merit as shared experiences often act as springboards for discussion and further exploration of ideas.

The BLST under investigation fitted the criteria of an educational study tour and Figure 7.1 shows its relationship to pilgrimage and tourism.

Figure 7.1 Three types of visitors to the Bible lands



There are limited investigations that focus on Christian educators as tour participants; however, Capets (2018) describes three outcomes for teacher pilgrims. The first outcome is to offer opportunities for personal faith development. This outcome is also widely supported across all types of religious tours (Fouts, 2018; Hattingh et al., 2019; Kaell, 2010; Reynaud & French, 2017). A second outcome is to offer valid professional development in keeping with the faith-based school ethos, also supported by Reynaud & French (2017). Finally, a third outcome is to ignite a way of faith-sharing in the teachers' school communities. Cohen (2006) also puts forward the outcome of developing identity, particularly when travelling with others of a similar cultural/religious background.

French (2005) offers a reason why BLSTs may be successful in achieving these outcomes, positing that they are ‘memory events’ (p. 6) that create enduring memories with strong emotional connections to places and events while simultaneously building community. Memory events have the potential to be life-changing and to elicit long-term modifications in attitudes and behaviour. Bergsteiner and Avery (2008) agree, offering that the multi-modal learning experiences of university students during a short-term study tour ‘continue to grow after the tour and bring benefits to them at work’ (p. 33). While the findings of French (2005) and Bergsteiner and Avery (2008) relate to teenagers and university students respectively, it follows that adults who participate in multi-modal memory events may experience similar outcomes beyond the duration of a BLST. While the literature identifies several short-term impacts and benefits of study tours, and particularly BLSTs, there is little research that explores long-term impacts of BLSTs on the participants or those with whom they interact.

Method and Data Collection

This investigation drilled down into people’s hopes, experiences and realities. It was, therefore, best suited to a qualitative paradigm (Charmaz, 2014). A case study approach (Yin, 2014) that dealt with the perceptions of one cohort of people who travelled together on one BLST was chosen. All were educators, representing a variety of roles across primary, secondary and tertiary education. Twenty-five educators participated in the first round of data collection and twenty-four in the second round of data collection. Of these, eleven were biblical studies teachers, nine were administrators and four taught other subjects. Ten of the original twenty-five participated in the final round of data collection, nearly four years after the BLST. Although the study tour under investigation travelled through both the Bible and Reformation lands as part of a professional development tour, this chapter only reports on the Bible lands part of the itinerary, which included Jordan, Israel, Palestine and the cities of Athens and Rome.

Three research instruments were used to collect data. The first was a series of open-ended online surveys. Marshall and Rossman (2016) suggest complementing surveys with in-depth interviews and direct observation to enable triangulation of data. In this investigation, educators responded to survey questions in their

own words. The second type of research instrument was a series of interviews that allowed insight into the educators’ meaning-making of their lived experiences (Rubin et al., 2012; Seidman, 2013), and the third was in situ observation where body language, voice tone and other paralinguistic messages were recorded, supplementing the educators’ written and spoken words (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The researcher was a BLST participant and conducted interviews and observed the educators throughout the BLST. Table 7.1 explains the timing and purpose of the research instruments.

Table 7.1 Timing and Purpose of the Research Instruments

Research instrument	Purpose of the research instrument	When administered	No. of respondents
Open-ended surveys	To identify expectations of the BLST	Two weeks before the BLST	25
	To identify the nature of the ‘lived experiences’ while on the BLST (Charmaz, 2014) and their perceived impact.	Second to last day of the BLST	24
	To allow for retrospective reflection (Chase, 2011) and current evaluation.	Nearly four years after the BLST	10
Interviews	To explore perceptions of the BLST on a deep level.	Three times during the BLST	4
Observation	To gauge perceptions of the participants as a whole and individually from an in-out researcher perspective.	Ongoing during the BLST	25

Two questions informed this research:

1. What expectations and perceptions did Adventist educators hold of one Bible Lands Study Tour?
2. What were the self-perceived long-term impacts, if any, of one BLST on the participants’ roles as educators in Adventist institutions?

Data from the surveys, interviews and observations were transcribed and memoed for possible categories and themes, then coded line by line. Figure 2 shows the themes that emerged from expectations before the BLST, to perceptions during the BLST and further to anticipated impacts of the BLST on the educators’ learning environments. The developing anticipated impact themes formed the basis of the open-

ended survey that BLST educators were invited to complete nearly four years after the BLST. A further round of memoing and coding identified recurring words and phrases and enabled the three themes to be further broken down into sub-themes, as seen in Figure 7.3. These sub-themes represent the realised impacts of the BLST on responding educators and their learning environments or work.

Findings

Answers to the research questions are reported in four sections that parallel the timeframe of the BLST. Figures 7.2 and 7.3 identify these sections. Four sets of data reveal the educators' expectations of the BLST, their perceptions during the BLST, their anticipated impact on their learning environments at the end of the BLST, and the realised impact nearly four years after the BLST.

Expectations Before the Bible Lands Study Tour

Skinner and Theodossopoulos (2011) posit that 'expectation is critical and fundamental' to travel (p. 3). Thus, the BLST participants were surveyed about their expectations before embarking on the BLST. The participants identified three areas of expectation: spiritual, professional and personal, as seen in the expectations line in Figure 7.2. These reasons were not mutually exclusive, and each participant gave more than one reason.

Spiritual Expectations

When asked about the anticipated spiritual aspects of the tour, twenty-four educators anticipated that the BLST would be a catalyst for spiritual growth and a deeper connection with Jesus. One educator stated, *'I am waiting to find out'*. Educators anticipated that the BLST would strengthen their own belief and commitment to the Bible as the Word of God and that this would have an impact on their teaching by enabling them to teach more inspirationally. *'If I return a more spiritual person, students are bound to be touched by the spirit,'* and *'I would love to bring into the classroom some of the awe and wonder that I hope to capture.'*

Although the BLST was advertised as a study tour, it was clear that the participants also viewed it as an opportunity to *'feel more*

connected to Jesus'. One educator was looking forward to *'a month of quality Jesus time,*' and another wanted to find *'closeness with God*'. Some educators had expectations that experiencing the land of Jesus' earthly ministry would impact their relationship with Jesus. One wanted to understand *'more about my Jesus through "walking in his footsteps"'*. Others wanted to *'delve deeper into [their] faith with knowledge and experience of physical places that Jesus...walked,'* and they hoped that *'the tour breathes new life into [their] faith and that it ignites new questions and imparts new perspectives'*.

Professional Expectations

Twenty-four educators gave professional development as a reason for joining the BLST. Biblical studies teachers elaborated on their hope that the BLST would positively impact their teaching. A sub-theme that emerged related to bringing the Bible alive, or *'to show my kids more of Jesus!'*. One educator hoped the trip would provide *'tools to help me bring the Bible alive for my students'*. The word *'alive'* in this context was echoed by several of the educators.

The educators felt that the BLST would increase their knowledge, especially experiential knowledge and understanding that would bring more authenticity into their teaching. One educator expressed, *'it will pump me full of information about the various places of interest that will help me give more realistic and impacting anecdotes and information in class'*. Another educator believed it would *'give depth and breadth to [their] ability to share the stories with students and church members alike,'* and another felt it would *'help to contextualise stories in the Bible'*.

The educators also felt that the BLST would assist them to gather resources such as photographs and artefacts that would enable them to teach more visually and kinaesthetically. As one educator said, *'I believe it will also equip me with invaluable knowledge and resources [that] I can use in the classroom'*.

The educators on the BLST had high professional expectations as can be seen from the following aims set by individual participants.

- *To grow as an educator and return home with experiences and tools to make Jesus real and relevant in the lives of my students.*

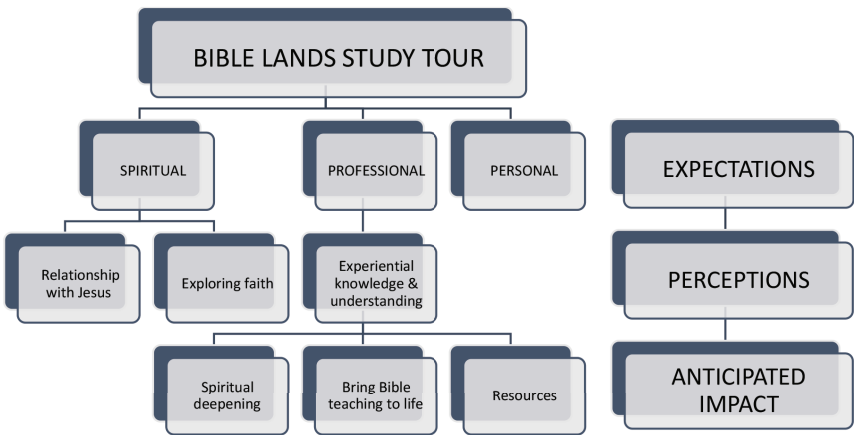
- *To help [students] understand the life of Jesus and His significance in their own lives and experiences.*
- *To equip me with knowledge to answer some of the ‘tough’ questions my students might throw at me.*
- *To touch the lives of my students with the stories I can share with them.*

Personal Expectations

Educators also offered personal reasons for taking the BLST alongside their spiritual and professional reasons. While these reasons did not feature as strongly as spiritual and professional reasons, educators commented on their desires to visit new places, to ‘*see and learn a lot about Bible times that I have only read and heard about so far,*’ ‘*to gain knowledge,*’ and ‘*to see lots of places and learn lots*’. One educator stated, ‘*I believe in lifelong learning, so my personal expectations are that I will grow as a person: intellectually, socially/ emotionally and spiritually*’.

All participants were open to new experiences and Jerusalem was the most anticipated destination. All had high expectations of the experiential learning that would take place and looked forward to an ‘*immersive learning journey*’. Expectations were high as the educators prepared to journey from Petra in the east to Rome in the west.

Figure 7.2 BLST reported expectations, perceptions and anticipated impact of the Bible Lands Study Tour



Perceptions of the Bible Lands Study Tour

Interlude #1

It is five days into the BLST. The group is standing on a grassy hillside overlooking the Sea of Galilee. It is spring and the green hillsides that end in the sparkling waters of the lake are a long way from classrooms and office desks. One educator is sharing thoughts from a biblical parable for morning worship. The listeners are immersed in the story. They have spent the past two days exploring the region of Galilee, where Jesus spent most of his ministry. There have been many high points. The educators have sailed on the Sea of Galilee. They have stood on a pebbly beach imagining a fire, the whiff of grilled fish, and the risen Lord. They have visited the excavations at Magdala, reflected on the traditional site of the Mount of Blessings and explored Capernaum and various other sites where characters and settings of familiar Bible stories have leapt into life. There is more to come: Nazareth, Jerusalem, Jericho, Bethlehem, Athens, and Rome are some of the adventures still waiting to happen.

Three things occurred as the BLST progressed. The daily experiences impacted the educators' relationships with Jesus, they explored other aspects of their faith and they grew in experiential knowledge and understanding.

Relationships with Jesus

As the educators relaxed in each other's company, discussions on the bus reflected their experiences. The conversations and interviews revealed emerging themes. It became clear that this was both a spiritual and professional journey. Comments from two of the educators offered support for this claim:

This is as much a spiritual tour as it is an educational one. We are on a journey of understanding people and culture. When you do this, you realise it's about relationships and we are trying to maintain/rekindle/find a relationship with Jesus that then impacts our relationship with our students and others we meet.

The following comment describes an experience at the traditional site of the Mount of Blessings:

I sat on the Mount of Blessings today and reflected on the words of Jesus from Matthew 5. This time away from the classroom is a time

of reflection for me, a time to take stock of my relationship with the One who changed history with each footprint, each touch and each word. I hope I can capture the atmosphere to share with my students.

Exploring faith

All twenty-four educators identified some impact of the BLST on their faith, although the degree of impact and the triggers for this impact varied. Some words and phrases used to describe the BLST in the context of exploring faith were, ‘*once in a lifetime trip*’, ‘*life-changing experience*’, ‘*draws you even closer to God*’ and ‘*challenges the extent of your commitment*’. The following comment is typical of the feelings experienced in the latter part of the trip:

I have grown closer to God as this trip brought the Bible to life. These aren't just stories or historic events. The stories of the Bible have a place and a physical Jesus who walked, talked and breathed life into our world again. Not just on the cross, but in every day of our lives

The educators were able to explore other aspects of their faith in multiple contexts. Sometimes it was a place that prompted reassurance in the trustworthiness of the Bible as in Qumran, site of the Dead Sea Scrolls, or the site of old Jericho.

Four educators found their most significant spiritual impact came not from places visited, but from the ongoing spiritual discussions and interaction with other BLST members. Conversations on the tour bus were lively and rigorous, with one educator describing them as ‘*an opportunity to explore facets of faith within a safe environment*’. One of the more experienced educators on the BLST felt that he had grown spiritually by travelling with Adventist educators and interacting with ‘*some very spiritual, very committed young teachers*’. Another spoke of the extended and rigorous discussions about the ‘*delicate balance between God's love and God's law...Fanaticism against Laissez-Faire version of Salvation*’. It was a thoughtful reflection on this and similar topics that positively impacted his faith. Experiences during the day initiated some spiritual conversations but others appeared to emerge independently from the locations visited.

Experiential Knowledge and Understanding

Every educator on the BLST acknowledged growth in experiential knowledge and understanding. Experiential knowledge is gained through immersing oneself in a place or event. Every new place, every new building, every new cultural experience created a bricolage of understanding and a richness of emotional connection for the educators. In the words of one educator, after surveying the wilderness view from the summit of Mt Nebo, *'I understand why the Lord needed to give them manna'*. Another educator elaborated on finding Mars Hill still intact and natural in the middle of Athens, and *'could imagine Paul there sitting down with philosophers and having a chat'*.

As the educators strolled the streets of the old city of Jerusalem, empathised with worshippers at the western (wailing) wall, walked the ruins of old Jericho and sang in a shepherd's cave, their attitudes and conversations indicated their immersion in the environment. Mostly, they were active participants. At some sites they were talkative but sometimes a meditative silence settled over the group. Some of the churches built over traditional sacred sites evoked a sense of awe. In contrast, others engendered disquiet with the perceived excess of religious 'bling' and the pilgrims' acts of devotion that were foreign to the faith traditions of the BLST educators.

It was the stories that appealed to the educators rather than the actual sites, which is why the garden tomb site of Jesus's burial was more popular with the BLST educators than the more reliably documented Church of the Holy Sepulchre. As one educator stated:

That claustrophobic little room may be a more reliable site for the tomb of Jesus, but the biblical story of Jesus's death and resurrection came to life for me at the site of the garden tomb. For me, it is the story that matters, that the tomb is empty, that Jesus lives and not the actual site where it happened.

The Anticipated Impact of the Bible Lands Study Tour

Interlude #2

It is the last day of the BLST. The educators have walked many kilometres along stony streets and dusty trails, down valleys and up mountains and into humble dwellings and ornate churches. They have

marvelled at the citadel of Masada and have been exposed to new ways of thinking and doing as they jostled with pilgrims and tourists at sacred sites. They have immersed themselves in the culture and context of the biblical narrative. They have built on prior understanding and constructed new meaning. They have taken their last photographs, farewelled new friends and made their last purchases. They began the journey as strangers or acquaintances. They end it as colleagues with a shared experience. At the end of a long flight, their co-workers and students wait for them to resume where they left off. What will they take back with them? Besides memories, what do they believe they have to offer their students and colleagues?

Three areas emerged from the data that educators believed would assist them on their return to work. These are identified in Figure 7.2 as spiritual deepening, bringing Bible teaching to life and resources collected on the BLST.

Spiritual Deepening

The educators identified their spiritual growth as a factor they felt would impact their work environments. One educator described it as, *'A life-changing experience at a personal level that will benefit my personal commitment and broaden my capacity to share with others'*. Another educator shared, *'My previous relationship with God is strengthened. It's no longer an existentialist experience, I've walked where Jesus walked'*. Several educators felt that the BLST had given a new dimension to the relationship they already had with Jesus and were committed to sharing their experience with their colleagues and students. However, one educator acknowledged that *'it's very hard to pass on an experience, but it will give a genuineness to what I teach'*. As the educators were either administrators or teachers in the Adventist Christian education system, they anticipated a flow-on effect from sharing their experiences with others.

The overlap between spiritual and professional impacts was evident, with one educator stating, *'furthermore, through the deepening of my own spiritual relationship, I am able to share Jesus on a deeper level with the students that I teach'*.

Bringing Bible Teaching to Life

The idea of being able to bring the Bible to life in worship experiences, general teaching and biblical studies classes was embraced with anticipation. As already indicated, the educators all felt spiritually impacted to some extent by the study tour and expressed confidence that this would impact their teaching positively. Some educators identified the BLST as *'life-changing'* and noted, *'as far as content and Bible curriculum, it really brought it to life'*. It was not only their heightened spirituality that the participants anticipated would bring their classes to life but their experiential learning.

The value that the educators placed on experiential learning for their future teaching is apparent in the following quotes.

- *Every single place we went, I can use for my classes to teach the Word of God with more knowledge.*
- *It [BLST] gave me a better understanding of the location and places we visited.*
- *Teachers can learn so much about the Bible stories as they have been there.*

Experiential knowledge and firsthand knowledge were repeated phrases in the surveys. One educator wrote, *'This trip has equipped me with firsthand knowledge that will enable me to be a more effective storyteller in Bible classes. It has given me the opportunity to reflect on what I want my Bible classes to look like'*. Biblical studies teachers felt excited at the prospect of returning to their class *'with greater enthusiasm'* and *'better understanding'*. This understanding included a perception of distances, the look of the land and even the crops grown. One educator commented, *'I have a rich storehouse of stories and insights to share'*. Another wrote, *'I am looking forward to using many of my experiences to engage students through worships and class time'*. It was clear that the participants felt the BLST would help them connect with their students in new and focused ways.

Resources

In addition to knowledge, the educators collected resources they felt would be useful in their teaching (Figure 7.2). The most popular way to gather resources was by taking photographs but some purchased books and other items to use as visual aids while teaching.

The educators took different approaches to gathering resources. One wrote, *'I now have lots of resources I could use at school'*. Another took photos, but said, *'Don't know if I will use photos'*. This educator also *'bought many books along the way,'* suggesting that resources were more for personal use than class use.

The educators were open to sharing their faith, experiential knowledge and resources beyond biblical studies classes. Even those who were not biblical studies teachers planned to use the BLST experiences in other subject areas, *'mostly as illustrations – even in maths'*. Those who included personal reasons for taking the trip were profoundly satisfied with their experience and there was anticipation that the impact of the BLST would extend beyond the classroom. One quote sums up what many educators expressed: *'I am determined to fit telling of Christ and what He has done for us all into my interactions'*.

Realised Impacts of the BLST Four Years Later

Interlude #3

It is four years since the educators returned from the BLST. Roads and rivers, relics and rituals, the taste of fresh pomegranate juice mingled with the odours of outdoor markets are distant memories, removed from classrooms and offices and the busyness of school life by time and place. What has been forgotten? What has endured? Have the poignant memories of the BLST survived the rush and bustle of the educators' lives? Has the educators' enthusiasm at the end of the BLST waned, or has it found a permanent place in their daily learning environments?

Perceptions of the BLST indicated three areas where educators felt they could impact the learning environment. These are shown in Figure 7.2 as spiritual deepening, increased experiential knowledge and the resources they had acquired to supplement their teaching. Items on an open-ended survey were designed to explore these three areas in depth. The responses would reveal which anticipated impacts had been realised.

Realised Impact on Spiritual Growth.

Four years after the BLST, all those who responded indicated that their experience had a great or very great spiritual impact on them that

endured beyond the end of the trip. The educators' spiritual impact was categorised into three distinct sub-themes: their relationship with Jesus/God, their connection to the Bible and their maturing faith growing out of discussions with other educators on the trip. See Figure 7.3 for this breakdown.

Relationship with Jesus

Some participants indicated that the BLST had taken their relationship with Jesus to a deeper level. As they reflected on the past four years, they expressed the continuing impact that visiting the sites of Jesus's birth, ministry and death had on their desire to build a closer relationship with Him. One educator stated, *'it [the BLST] has given me a personal connection to the meta-narrative of the Bible and deepened my relationship to Jesus'*.

While we cannot assume that all the educators maintained the level of relationship with Jesus that they indicated at the end of the BLST, there is evidence that retrospective memories continue to impact this area of their lives. One educator commented:

Sometimes the busyness of life catches up with me and I feel my relationship with Jesus ebbing. When this happens, I take out the photo book I made of the trip and the reality of it all comes flooding back again. It helps to put my life back into perspective and restore my relationship with Jesus.

The teachers felt a connection between their relationships with Jesus and their teaching. One teacher believed it had *'impacted all areas of my teaching, to me personally in a way to empathise and understand others and to feel Jesus more active in my life'*.

Meaningful Bible Reading

The second area of spiritual growth noted was in Bible reading. As one educator commented, *'I have been blessed with amazing insights into the context of life at the time of Christ. It has enriched my understanding and deepened my appreciation for scripture'*. Another commented, *'it opened my eyes to different ways of understanding the biblical text'*. A similar response observed that the BLST had affirmed the educator's faith *'and made my Bible reading come alive'*. Other comments related to having a *'better understanding'* of the Bible and how Bible reading connected them to God. One educator expressed

a belief that *'God walks and connects with those who are willing to connect and walk with Him'*. Another reflected, *'Whenever I read the scripture, I am able to recall the places and experiences that we enjoyed'*.

Maturing Faith from BLST Community

The third area of spiritual growth identified four years after the BLST was what could be called a maturing of faith that developed within the BLST community. One educator identified this maturity as the ability *'to hold differences of opinion in tension much more than I could before'*. While not all the respondents to the final survey reflected on a maturing faith that emerged from times spent exploring the Bible lands with an eclectic group of educators, it was a theme that matched the interview perceptions and observations during the BLST. One educator *'found the trip personally rewarding as one of the greatest benefits was new friendships and amazing discussions about life and spirituality'*.

This capstone comment summarises the spiritual impact of the trip:

The memories of the experience, particularly with the group we had, are so tangible, distant, but also so vibrant. Even the differences of understanding within the group taught me so much about myself and my beliefs... There is also a much deeper desire to seek an authentic spirituality in my life now. I was always interested before, but my understanding of the context of the Bible has made me realise the complexity and nuance that I lacked before.

Bringing Bible Teaching to Life

An analysis of the open-ended responses indicated that bringing Bible teaching to life was an enduring outcome of the BLST. This was further categorised into experiential knowledge, experiential understanding and teaching Bible lessons with authenticity, empathy, passion and insight as shown in Figure 7.3. The educators made more comments about experiential knowledge and understanding than any other aspect in the final survey.

Experiential Knowledge and Understanding

Educators commented on the emotional connection they felt with biblical stories and events after visiting the places where they took place.

- *To visit places where such amazing history took place had a profound effect on me.*
- *It really brought the Bible to life and showed me how real and personal our God is.*
- *I guess the realisation that these places actually existed and being there in a tangible way (not just Google Earth) made a big impact [on] how the different Bible stories actually looked instead of the storybook pictures I grew up with.*
- *Visiting the Bible lands was an amazing experience that allowed me to contextualise the Bible narrative.*
- *I grew in experiential knowledge and faith.*

While experiential knowledge gained on the BLST benefitted the educators, they also believed it had a flow-on effect to their students and colleagues.

Authenticity, Empathy, Passion and Insights in Bible Lessons.

Every one of the biblical studies teachers who responded to the final survey expressed that their experiential knowledge from the BLST assisted them in the delivery of Bible lessons. The most popular areas for providing experiential learning were the Galilee area, Jerusalem, Qumran and Jericho. Examples included sharing ‘*how I have walked on the little stony beach*’, or ‘*walking down the Via Dolorosa towards Calvary*’. Other examples included the stories of Bible characters such as Zacchaeus, Peter, Mary Magdalene and the two demoniacs. Biblical studies teachers highlighted the setting of events and stories, using their experiential knowledge to place stories in context for their students. One educator gave a specific example, commenting:

My teaching of the Year 8 unit on Jericho was enriched considerably by the opportunity to show pictures of the old town itself; to discuss its relative size, the dryness of the surrounding area, the palms, etc. It came alive for the students more as they were then able to place the story in its context.

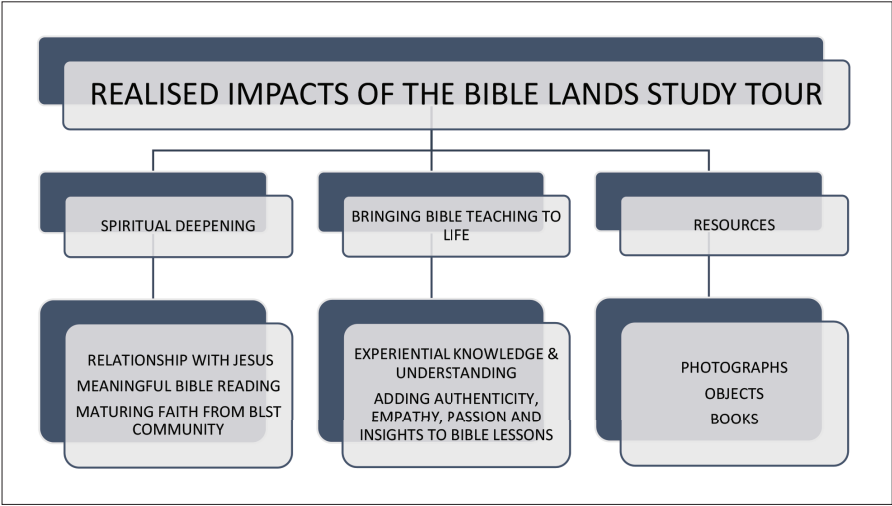
Biblical Studies teachers felt that they not only provided a more authentic context for their Bible lessons since the BLST but shared with greater empathy, passion and insight. These words and their synonyms frequently appeared in the survey responses, as shown in the following examples:

- *Although the garden tomb is in dispute as being the burial place of Jesus, my Sabbath morning experience there highlighted to me what it may have been like for the women who went searching for the body of their Lord. I have been able to share this story and others with greater **empathy** than if I had never been there.*
- *I feel more **passionate** about telling these stories now as I have had a personal connection to the area where it has taken place.*
- *It has certainly made me more **passionate** about teaching Bible; and has given me more anecdotal evidence to add to the **authenticity** of Scripture.*
- *Just being there, absorbing the culture, gave me **insights** that I could not have gained any other way but through direct experience. It has been easier to share what I have experienced firsthand.*

Photographs, Objects and Books

The educators arrived home with books and objects relevant to their teaching, but the overriding resources were photographs. Objects included maps, a variety of olivewood carvings and other small items to engage students. One person did not take photographs or collect resources and in retrospect said, *‘I wish I had’*. Others did take photographs and have used them in their teaching, *‘When talking about stories from the Bible in class I have used photos of the exact area to illustrate the point and bring more reality for the students’*. Photographs of the following places have all been used in classes and worship events: Jericho, Galilee, Capernaum, Magdala, Jerusalem, Masada, the Dead Sea, and the Wailing Wall in Israel. In Rome: Mars Hill in Athens and various archaeological sites and churches.

Figure 7.3 Realised Impacts Identified Four Years After the BLST



Was the Bible Lands Study Tour of Good Value?

The first research question asked, ‘What expectations and perceptions did educators hold of one BLST?’ The expectations fell into three categories: spiritual, professional and personal. The spiritual expectations ranged across different aspects of faith development, although a deeper relationship with Jesus emerged as the most given response. The post-tour responses indicated that the educators’ perceptions of their expectations had been realised. This affirms previous research that found BLSTs offered opportunities for personal faith development, (Capet, 2018; Reynaud & French, 2017) and is consistent with Chase (2018), who cites a closer relationship with Jesus as an outcome of visits to the Holy Land.

Also emerging on this BLST was a sense of spiritual community that facilitated reflection through discussion and sharing. It highlights the benefits of participating in group study tours where one engages in reciprocal sharing of faith journeys and spiritual perspectives and engages in rigorous discussion on some of the more challenging aspects of Christianity and faith. While some educators found this aspect of the BLST played a more significant role in their spiritual growth than others, this notion of a spiritual community supports the ideas of Brown et al. (2019) and Cohen (2006) who also posit the faith benefits of group travel.

The importance of personal spirituality of school administrators and teachers on the ethos and culture of a school should not be underestimated. Furthermore, the impact of committed biblical studies teachers who can passionately share their faith with authenticity as they teach is highly desirable. Therefore, any professional development event that can influence the overall ethos or culture of a school positively, or the standard of teaching, is worth the resources invested in it.

The second question asked was, ‘What were the self-perceived long-term impacts, if any, of one BLST on the participants’ roles as educators in Adventist institutions?’ This question related to the BLST’s efficacy as a professional development study tour. It was clear that the educators saw this as a professional learning opportunity and were keen to find ways to integrate their new learning with their teaching or administrative roles, a finding that aligns with Bergsteiner and Avery (2008), who also reported similar attitudes after a study tour.

Experiential learning was a feature of the BLST. Every day was a new adventure, an opportunity to immerse in the culture and location of the Bible. Every archaeological site, town, new landscape or experience offered an accurate context that enabled authenticity, empathy, passion and a connection to the biblical narrative that offered insights into biblical stories, characters and passages. The educators’ survey responses, interview transcripts and observation notes of the activities in which they engaged all indicate that this trip fitted the description of professional development aligned with the Christian ethos of the schools from which they came (Capets, 2018). Further, the educators’ comments identified the BLST as a memory event (French, 2005) and voiced the long-term impact this had on their lives and work.

It is worth noting that the educators’ comments about the places they visited focused more on the biblical events that happened there rather than on the sites themselves and that the sites most commented on were the more natural ones, rather than the churches and shrines built over sacred sites. This emphasis on sacred stories rather than sacred sites resonates with the perspectives of others, for example, Brown et al. (2019), Cohen (2006), Hattingh et al. (2019) and Knott (2010) and differentiates the BLST from a pilgrimage. It is also what

enabled the educators to share with authenticity, empathy, passion and insights during the years after the BLST.

Lastly, those educators who took photographs and purchased souvenirs to use them to enhance their lessons and worship times found the items also added authenticity to their teaching.

Among the educators were teachers of subjects other than biblical studies, and administrators. They used their experiential learning in several ways, from sharing informally to using authentic experiences in worship experiences and sermons. Some may calculate the expense of a BLST and wonder whether the benefits are worth the cost and time involved. One administrator who was on the BLST commented, *'I was inspired to ensure that there were future opportunities for teachers to engage in similar tours'*. The other educators who participated in the BLST agreed that every educator in Adventist schools should have this opportunity. The educators who participated in the final survey were unanimous that this learning experience was beneficial to their spirituality, to their teaching and other professional roles.

Implications from this case study target three groups: administrators of Christian schools, Christian teachers and organisers of BLSTs for educators. Administrators should consider the benefits to school ethos, culture and teaching and support teachers wishing to participate in a BLST. Teachers, especially biblical studies teachers, should consider participating in a BLST as a way to deepen their relationship with Jesus and bring their biblical studies lessons to life. BLST organisers should recognise the two dimensions of spirituality and experiential learning and plan for a balance of experiences that will ultimately enhance the revelation of Jesus in the classroom.

Epilogue

What has endured from the BLST? Relationships with Jesus and personal spirituality have consolidated and deepened. Misplaced memories suddenly re-emerge in the middle of classes and conversations. The emotional connection with biblical characters and with Jesus makes it easier to bring the Bible to life. Teachers recall the summit of Mt Nebo and the view towards the Promised Land when teaching about Moses. The stories of Jesus' ministry are accompanied by memories of wet feet in the Jordan River, an ancient boat and fishing nets.

The life of Christ is punctuated by memories of a shepherds' cave, a grassy hillside, ancient olive trees and an empty tomb. The educators now share biblical lessons and stories with greater authenticity, empathy, passion and insight. They illuminate their experiences with photographs and other visual aids. The footsteps of Jesus still echo in their hearts and take on new life in their interactions with others. They wish that everyone could go where they have been, see what they have seen and enter the community of those who have walked where Jesus walked.

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