

**Journals of Kit Lin Cheung
PTS 762A:
Ministry in the Global Context
June 13-26, 2009**

June 13, 2009 (Saturday)

After fourteen hours of flight from Vancouver, BC via Calgary and Frankfurt, our plane came swooping in over the Mediterranean Sea and also onto the runway in the afternoon. My husband (kwok-ting) and I arrived at Beirut International Airport in Lebanon in the afternoon. We were joined by Ken at the Frankfurt airport. The student from the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary came to the airport to take us to the seminary.

Our first impression of Beirut was a lovely land of mountains, bordered by the sea. On our way to ABTS, we noticed many of the vehicles were driving without lights. Cars just cut off as they speed around the corners and seemed unable to stay within lines. All along our trip, the guard rails were mangled and they were evidence of Lebanon's high accident rate.

The Arab Baptist Theological Seminary (ABTS) was situated on a beautiful mountain, overlooking the whole of Beirut. It was nice and cool up on the mountain. In 2005, ABTS founded the Institute of Middle East Studies (IMES) with the main purpose of providing opportunities for Christians and Muslims to engage with one another through better understanding and practice. The vision of IMES is to promote and teach Christ-like attitudes and approaches towards Muslims.

In the airport of Beirut, the relationships of the Lebanese family are very closed to one another. The whole family gathered in the lobby, the children stood around the adults and the adults talked loudly, hugged and kissed each other. The first impression of the Arabic people was very warm, affectionate and friendly. We were told that they have closed family relationship, loyal to family and friends, and honor is also important in the Arabic culture. People strive to gain influence and to accumulate and display wealth, which are signs of success that win respect.

June 14th (Sunday)

Today we have a restful day in order to prepare ourselves for the Middle East Conference from June 15th to 19th. In the late afternoon, we were joined by a group of Fuller Seminary students in touring around the downtown of Beirut.

In the downtown of Beirut, men and women mix freely, participated in outdoor activities and enjoyed the smoking, drinking Turkish coffee and eating good food, including ice cream in the restaurants. Arabic traditional foods include kebbe, a dish of lamb and crushed wheat, and tabbouleh, a salad made of parsley, mint, tomatoes, and crushed wheat. People enjoy a variety of foods,

however, and restaurants serve everything from French, Arabic, Turkish, Persian, and Greek specialties to hamburgers and pizza. Women, mostly, are similar to Western women in dress, attitudes and activities. Sometime, we saw Muslim women who are more conservative in attitude and dress. Men generally wear Western clothes, although some older Muslim men wear the Arab head-dress, or kufiyah. It is good to have a first-hand knowledge of the people and culture in Beirut. Everywhere, we saw ruins of the war such as ruined buildings and Roman bath. We were told that the government kept the ruins in order to remind their people of the war and in keeping those ruins, a great sense of hatred and revenge could be felt.

June 15th to 19th (Monday to Friday)

Two students (Ken and Myself) from Western Seminary attended the Middle east Conference VI at ABTS and this year's theme is "Muslim Women at the Intersection of Faith and Culture." We were joined by eleven students from Fuller Seminary, students from ABTS, local workers from Beirut and also from different parts of the world such as other cities in Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Egypt, Switzerland, Paris, Germany, UK and USA. There were altogether about 70 people in the Conference.

In the morning, we had Bible lessons from three women in the Bible namely, Ruth, Esther from the Old Testament and the Phoenician woman and the Samaritan women from the New Testament. Afterwards, we had the first session on "The Law and Gender in Muslim Societies". It was followed by a mid-morning session on "Gender and Leadership in Middle Eastern Societies". In the afternoon, we had another session on "Engaging the Isalm of the Heart". Before dinner, we had two Muslim women come to share their views as concerning the veil. The first woman, who is more conservative, shared that the veil is a duty, sacred and a divine requirement. Physical covering is a first step and also it helped to protect the mind and the heart from impure thoughts. Another woman, who is not veiled, shared that it is not necessary. In the evening, we have three forums which were opened to the public and different people shared their views on "What is a woman?", "Why I am glad to be a Muslim woman / Christian woman?" and "Gender relations under God's rule."

The Middle East Conference widened my perspectives of the Middle East and also the beliefs, culture and practice of the Muslims. I found the Isalmic law extremely interesting and helpful. It laid a foundation for the understanding of the Muslim culture. The family law is of extreme importance in Isalm. Marriage, divorce and inheritance are important aspects of the Isalmic Law.

In the session on "Empowering Middle Eastern Women", the speaker explored the models for female leadership in Isalm and Christianity. After laying the foundation of the founding discourses and methods of interpretation, she discussed the pious models in Isalm past and present – Asiya, Maryam, Khadijah and Fatima in conservative and feminist readings. She further explored the pious modern and sufi Devotee – Fatima and Zaynab in revolutionary discourse and Rabi'a al-"Adawiyya – Female Saint.

Furthermore, she discussed Jesus and the discipleship of equals – something radically new or status quo?

In the session on “Engaging the Isalm of the Heart”, the speaker shared her D. Min. Dissertation on “A Theology of the Affective”. She has attended a series of Qur’an studies among a group of Muslim women and she analyzed the notes looking for clues about how Isalm interacts with the emotions, attitudes, prejudices and values (that is, the affective patterns) of the women.

After lunch, we departed from ABTS and made our way heading to Dasmacus, Syria. We were joined by Grant Porter of Operation Mobilization, John and his wife, Heather, Joanie, Ken’s wife.

June 20th (Saturday)

Damascus or Dimashq, is one of the world's oldest continuously inhabited cities. It is the capital and chief city of Syria, in southwestern Syria, on the Baradá River, near the Anti-Lebanon Mountains in the southwestern part of the country.

The St. Paul’s Convent that we resided for two days was the place where Paul received the light from Jesus (Acts 9:3-9). When I meditated in the morning at the same place where Paul converted to Jesus, I was so touched by Paul’s dedication. When a man committed his whole life, God acts wonderfully and amazingly in the human history. Suddenly, I came to know the message that Paul spoke by his own heart, saying, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” (Romans 12:1)

We spent a whole day in an old city of Damascus, especially on the streets of the city, with the exception of the “street called Straight” (Acts 9:11). On the Straight Street, Paul was supposed to have lived, and it is crooked and narrow. The houses frequently combine a splendidly decorated interior with a plain and somber exterior. The walls fronting the street are usually without windows. And we had a worship time in the house of Ananias. Once again, we felt the warm fellowship in Christ as Paul and Ananias did.

In the evening, we devoured delicious, gourmet food which is typical in the Middle East,

June 21st (Sunday)

After breakfast, we began our journey to the monastery at Deir Mar Musa.

The Deir Mar Musa was a monastery located on a very high mountain built by Qumrān, also called Khirbet Qumrān (“stone ruin”), ancient Jewish settlement. Qumrān was the center of a large religious community, probably one of the Essene sect. The Essenes broke away from other Jews in the 2nd century BC and, persecuted by the Maccabees, went into the wilderness, which

seemed well suited to their ascetic way of life. Essenes were members of a Jewish religious brotherhood organized on a communal basis and practicing strict asceticism. This order, with about 4000 members, existed in Palestine and Syria from the 2nd century BC to the 2nd century AD. The Essenes, however, are not mentioned in the Bible or in rabbinical literature. After the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls, Qumrān was carefully excavated. Archaeologists were able to identify some rooms that had been used for study and worship, others apparently used for communal meals, a spacious chamber with inkpots (perhaps the scriptorium where scrolls were copied), and pools for bathing.

When I had my meditation in one of the caves early in the morning, I marvelous what God has done in the human history and displays His wonders in the modern time. The Scriptures, specially almost the whole book on Isaiah, was preserved in the caves for about two thousand years. When the Liberal Theology declared that there is no prophecy in the Bible, but only the historical writing. At that time, they proclaimed that "God is Dead." The Dead Sea Scrolls, indeed, was written before 2nd century BC, witnesses the truth. God's Word pronounces His act in our human history; His act in our history witnesses in the Bible. The Essenes did not know the contribution to Christianity when they committed their whole life in copying the scripts. But, they were faithful to God's calling in their lives. This teaches me a great lesson in focus on God alone, trust and obey Him and lead a life that is worthy of the calling that he has called us.

The basic teachings of the Essenes were love of God, love of virtue, and love of one's fellow humans. Their major task was to copy the scripts. After 1947, new light was thrown on the Essenes by certain ancient Hebrew scrolls that were discovered near the Dead Sea at Khirbat Qumrān, which may have been the site of an Essene community of the 1st century AD.

June 22nd (Monday)

On our way to Aleppo, Syria, we made an excursion to Ebla which is an ancient city of northern Syria, and it was discovered in 1968 by the Italian archaeologist Paolo Matthiae at Tell Mardīkh, a 56-hectare (140-acre) mound south of Halab (Aleppo). Excavating the site in 1975, Matthiae unearthed Ebla's royal archives, a collection of more than 14,000 inscriptions on clay tablets dating from 2500-2200 BC. Written in the cuneiform characters originated by the Sumerians of Mesopotamia, adapted to the language of Ebla's Semitic inhabitants, they show the city to have been an important commercial center ruled by a merchant aristocracy with an elected king. They also reveal the existence of a flourishing north Syrian civilization rivaling that of Egypt and Mesopotamia in the 3rd millennium BC. This discovery gives a flood light on the Biblical writing, specially on the Pentateuch. In the site of Ebla, I could not hold my breath in giving my heartiest thanks to the

Lord who displays His glory in the Islamic land in such an amazing and awesome way.

June 23rd (Tuesday)

Allepo is one of the biggest and oldest cities in Syria. This city is the passage that Abraham walked through. Abraham stayed here for a short while on his way to Canaan for feeding his flock. Here we attended the house church and also witnessed an opening of a new church. During their worship, the Christians enjoyed singing and they sang heartily in Arabic for almost an hour. Although I could not sing along with them, my heart was full of thanksgiving and joy. Specially, I praised the Lord who granted me such a great opportunity to participate and be a witness in the opening a new Church in Syria.

June 24th (Wednesday)

We travelled back to Beirut after spending two days at Allepo. We arrived at Beirut in late afternoon. In the evening, we attended a house church and John shared the Word of God. It was followed by a time of group prayer. We were amazed by their initiation in coming to see, shared with us and requested us to pray for them. Their sincerity and long for Christian fellowship could be felt. It was an amazing and awesome experience for all of us.

After the prayer meeting, we had dinner. We enjoyed the Lebanese version of “fast food” – shwarma which is lamb, beef or chicken cooked on a spit and then wrapped in flat bread. They are delicious and also a good experience for us.

June 25th (Thursday)

We had an excursion to the Cedars of Lebanon. It was a beautiful and cooling place. Seeing and touching the cedars of Lebanon, we marvelled at God’s creation. God is also the Lord of human history and He protects His people and His creation.

June 26th (Friday)

We have a quiet day, resting, recollecting and reading. In the evening, we attended the service of a newly opened church in the Bekaa Valley. This is a lovely and cosy place and people flooded in. We were told that two house groups joined together to form this church. John shared the Word of God after their joyful singing. It was followed by a time of fellowship and prayers. We were very impressed by their openness in sharing themselves and requested us to pray for them. We really enjoyed praying with them and for them though we did not know the Arabic language. In Christ, there is no barrier of race, language and sex. We are one in the bond of love because we are His people and He is our Lord and Saviour.

June 27th (Saturday)

My husband and I left Beirut at 3:20am via Frankfurt and Calgary and arrived at Vancouver after fifteen and a half hours and it was about twenty-two hours with all the connections.

We were tired and exhausted but our minds were refreshed and renewed. At first, we had no idea what to expect from this country struggling with the aftermath of war. After visiting three big cities, namely, Beirut in Lebanon, Damascus and Aleppo in Syria, we just wanted to thank and praise God for His wonderful deeds in these lands. The trip had widened our perspectives, challenged our global perspectives in doing ministry and also corrected our stereotypes and misconceptions about the Middle East. Though the Muslims have now become the dominant political and cultural force in Lebanon and Syria, we perceive that God is in control and He will act in His time. He will bless the Christian community.

Our very prayer for the Middle East is “ To see God glorified, people reconciled and communities restored through the Church in the Arab world.”