It is a dream of many Christians to visit the Land of Israel. They think of this region as "the Holy Land," the place where Jesus, Moses, David and other biblical heroes walked. They want to walk where these personages walked and see the land they saw.

Oddly, most Christians who actually visit Israel fail to see what Jesus saw in Galilee. They primarily see what the gospels tell them to see. The accounts of their trips, whether photo travelogues posted on the Internet or ancient pilgrimage itineraries, are filled with sites supposedly relating to biblical events or people. If the gospels did not mention a place, then neither does the visitor.

This lens of faith reveals what believers (and the church) wish to see, but completely misses the land the way Jesus experienced it.

This month, I am living in Galilee and working at an archaeological site at the ancient village of Huqoq, up in the hills west of the Sea of Galilee. It is less than six miles from Capernaum, the center of Jesus' Galilee mission, and less than six miles from Magdala (modern Migdal), the home of Mary Magdalene. This is where Jesus hung out during much of his ministry.

Huqoq's elevation, several hundred feet above the Sea of Galilee, provides regular views of this large lake, breathtakingly surrounded by mountains (OK, large hills) on nearly all sides. It is hard to ignore and the gospels did not, for they regularly describe the lake and Jesus' interaction with it.

But looking inland, one is immediately struck by the land and its rugged character. Its geography is more like Wyoming's than the pastoral idylls often imagined by gospel readers. It mostly goes unmentioned by the gospel writers.

This area, just south of Capernaum, is dominated by Mt. Arbel, a high mountain capped by a large, rugged cliff. Its dramatic character is enhanced by being situated over one of the deepest river valleys coming off the Galilean plateau. The mountain's foot reaches the lake, making the area north of it into a natural basin containing Capernaum, Magdala, Huqoq and many other villages.

When Jesus walked from Capernaum to locations further west, such as Cana or Nazareth, he would have come through this area. There are three places the path could have come through: (1) the valley below Mt. Arbel; (2) the rising hills north of it, rough but walkable; or (3) a narrow cliff-lined valley known today as the Amud ("Pillar") that provides a direct, if rocky, route to the Galilean plateau. None of these are described in the gospels, although they were known to and experienced by everyone in this region.

Villages are another feature missing from the gospel narratives. This area was full of hamlets and small communities, usually situated at springs, wells and other water sources. The paths would have gone through them and travelers would have drunk water there, pausing in their journey to refresh themselves and perhaps eat or even purchase food.

While the gospels mention nameless "villages," a term that allows them to slide into the background, these would have been part of Jesus' everyday experience as he moved between them, preaching. Huqoq was just one of many villages he would have seen on the hills and perhaps even visited.

Another feature of Jesus' everyday experience that goes unmentioned in the gospels is the city of Tiberias. Situated south of Mt. Arbel on the lake, this city was being built by Herod Antipas as his capital during the time of Jesus' ministry in Capernaum. Placed on a promontory, it stands out not just on the land, but also the lake. People walking here would have seen it often from the hills, and the boats of Capernaum's fishing industry would regularly have sailed past this growing city located less than 15 miles south.

Furthermore, the gospels fail to mention Galilee's other city, Sepphoris, which was built -- during Jesus' childhood -- only five miles away from Nazareth. Since the gospels' Greek refers to Jesus' father as a teknon, a word which means "builder" rather than "carpenter," Joseph may have helped build it.

The gospels' picture of Galilee is gently rural, but not ruggedly so. Their presentation provided a land without cities, one that portrayed Jesus in his own realm and in which urban-based people of higher status, such as priest, scribes and Pharisees, were always out of place.

In the end, it is clear that the gospel writers presented what they thought was important for the believer, but they left out much of the character of Jesus' everyday life and the things he saw.

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