When religious tourists travel to Israel looking for the land where Jesus walked, they often anticipate pleasant, peaceful places. Their expectations may include a quaint lakeside village of Capernaum, a town like Chorazim nested among gently rolling hills, a moderate climate, lush farmland, or quiet woodlands filled with birdsong.

Reality differs significantly. Jesus spent most of his ministry in eastern Galilee, around the freshwater Sea of Galilee. The landscape is more like Arizona or New Mexico than the American Midwest or the South. Rugged landscapes dominate, where hills rise and fall rather than roll. Cliffs and precipitous rocky outcrops appear frequently, often rising high above narrow fertile strips of land by the lake.

By mid-May, temperatures are already in the 90s and can crack 100. Spring and its rains are long gone and the wild vegetation has mostly dried out. The streets are dusty, the winds are hot, and you almost expect a tumbleweed to roll across the road.

It brings to mind the 1948 western film, “The Treasure of the Sierra Madre,” although without the ever-present cacti. Indeed, cacti are surprisingly uncommon in Galilee, even though the Sabra cactus is widespread in Judea and southern Israel.

The absence of cacti should not be taken as an absence of thorns however. Indeed, thorn bushes and thorny weeds grow in abundance in this area, and they are nasty.

During my childhood, I often heard Jesus’ Parable of the Sower from Matthew 13. In the story, the farmer sows seed in the good earth and it grows strong and tall, but some of the seed falls elsewhere and fails: rocks, pathways, and among the thorns which “grew up and choked them.” As a child, I thought the thorns were thistles or nettles and could not understand why the farmer simply did not weed them out. After all, that’s what my mom had me do in our garden.

It turns out that plants with thorns grow everywhere in the Galilee and in a wide variety. This month, while I am working in Galilee, I daily walk a mile along the side of field. Along its edge I have counted eight different types of thorny weeds, to say nothing of the trees and bushes with thorns.

The thorn weeds are beautiful in their blooms, with flowers ranging from yellow to blue to purple. There is a calf-high plant with blue stems which dries to a crown shape. There is a waist-high purple thistle with pointed leaves as well as vicious thorns.

But it is the Globe Thistle which really stands out. It frequently grows in stands, and can reach as high as 5 or 6 feet. In the spring it bears a beautiful round, blue flower about the size of a baseball. But as it dries, it hardens so that any soft areas become hard and spikey.

Along the side of a field, it is easy to see why a sower would leave behind any seed that fell among them. A hedge of dry Globe Thistles comprises a formidable obstacle that would discourage even the most keen farmer.

But that is not the worst of it. Upper Galilee produces something like a Scottish Thistle which grows to 8 or 9 feet, towering over any human being. Walking through a grove (what else can you call it?) of these tall thistles becomes an experience of ducking and dodging to avoid the spikes, and even thick clothing provides only a small amount of protection.

In the end, the soft and attractive Galilee of American Christian imagery exists only in imagination. The reality is that it is a challenging land whose weeds seem to be dominated by those with thorns, some of which grow to an intimidating size.

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