## Monday - Day 1

On Monday morning, dad left Simon and I off at Bangor station to catch the 9:20am train to Great Victoria Street. We walked to the Belfast Institute, where we met up with some of the others who were going with us on the trip. A coach was scheduled to arrive at 11am to take us to Dublin airport. At around 4pm we were on our way to the Czech Republic. When we arrived in Prague, our luggage was transferred straight through to our Tel Aviv flight, so there wasn't too much to worry about. The Czech Republic is an interesting place. The Czech language sounds a lot like Russian and the people also have a Russian look about them. A couple of years ago, I had a dream about the Czech Republic. I dreamed I was travelling there as a missionary. I saw the country on the map, only for some reason the map was drawn in reverse, and the Czech Republic was where America should be in relation to the United Kingdom. I have no idea if this has any significance or not. I thought it was interesting when I heard we were travelling to Israel via the Czech Republic.

Around 8pm we boarded our flight for Tel Aviv. The view of the city from the plane as we came into land was quite impressive. Tel Aviv is second in size to Jerusalem, and it is home to Israel's main business sector. Israel is a very mountainous country, and looking down on the city's suburbs from the plane reminded me of that verse in Numbers 24:5, "how goodly are thy tents O Israel! ". Ben Gurion airport is very modern, and the marble floors and expansive buildings were quite impressive. It was strange at first to see and hear the Hebrew language being used everywhere you go, but after a while you become accustomed to that. I tried my best to speak to the Israelis in what little Hebrew I knew. When we arrived at the bus, we discovered that two of the suitcases belonging to our group were still at Prague airport, so this caused us a further delay. Our first hotel was to be in Netanya, but by the time we arrived there it was already 5am. So we went to our rooms to freshen up, before heading downstairs again for breakfast. The view from our bedroom window was most impressive, with the Mediterranean sea on one side and the skyscrapers of Tel Aviv on the other.

## Tuesday - Day 2

Let us go over to the other side", Luke 8:22, this would have been quite a significant journey. Once again the view from our hotel was fantastic. This hotel, the Golden Tulip, was the better of the two hotels we stayed at. Israeli food is very nice. All self-service. They had dishes of all sorts of salads, vegetables, pastries and meats. All the hotels stick by the kosher laws, which mean that you can't mix meat with dairy products. That means no milk in your tea when you are having your dinner. But the food is very healthy, and I didn't experience any problems with it whatsoever. In fact I particularly enjoyed their falafel, which is a pita bread pocket stuffed with the filling of your choice, salad, falafel (like stuffing balls) or schnitzel (bread-crumbed chicken). I tried everything that was offered, and the only thing I didn't like was the olives. They were very bitter. Around the hotel there were various stalls selling all sorts of souvenirs, sweets, ice cream and fast food. Very much like Tenerife, if you have ever been there. The only problem with the hotel was the windows, which were not double-glazed. There were stalls outside our hotel that blasted out music until 11pm. When you are getting up at 6am to start a long day's tour, it doesn't help to be kept awake until almost midnight. Daylight comes incredibly fast in Israel. At around 7am it could be pitch dark, and within the space of half an hour it is daylight. This was an interesting change from Northern Ireland, where it can take several hours for daylight to arrive. Another thing that took me by surprise was the number of trees in Israel. The Jewish National Fund has planted around 250 million trees in the land since 1948. I had expected Israel to be mostly semi-desert, but north of Jerusalem there are trees everywhere you look. Whole mountains are covered with pine trees, cyprus, olive and palms. It is like a garden of Eden (Isaiah 51:3). In Israel it is against the law to cut down trees or pick flowers. Due to the limited rainfall it can be difficult to get certain plants to grow. So the Israelis pioneered a drip system, whereby each plant is watered through a network of hosepipes, limiting water lost due to evaporation and ensuring not a drop is wasted. God's promise, that He would make the desert blossom for His returning people, is being fulfilled right before our eyes (Isaiah 35:1). The many trees are also home to many species of birds. Sparrows are as common in Israel as pigeons are here in the United Kingdom, and are much more tame than our variety. This reminds us of the value God places upon His people, when He said, "are not two sparrows sold for a farthing?", and that we are worth more to the Lord than many sparrows (Matthew 10:29-31).

**Wednesday - Day 3**

the place of a skull ", John 19:17. The site is now part of an Arab bus station. The Arabs raised the level of the ground to build the bus park, covering the opening which represents the skull's mouth in the process. The two eye sockets are still visible from the garden. We also visited the tomb itself. The tomb is unfinished and has suffered some damage in an earthquake. Some believe this could be the place where Christ's body was laid, but others say the tomb dates to the First Temple period and not the Second Temple era. But it was good to be there, and we had a brief time of singing and fellowship in the garden.

Later that day we visited the Shrine of the Book, where a copy of the complete scroll of the prophet Isaiah is kept. The original scroll is kept in a vault in a bank in Israel. This was a little disappointing though, as the building which houses the scroll is kept in semi-darkness, and you are not permitted to take photographs. And if you can't read Hebrew, you don't really know what Scriptures you are looking at. Outside the main building there is a scale model of the city of Jerusalem as it was during the Second Temple era. We then visited Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Museum. We spent an hour and a half walking through the main building. Unfortunately we had to rush past a lot of exhibits to get finished in time to get back on the bus. We also saw the eternal flame, and visited the memorial for the children who were murdered by the Nazis during the Holocaust. One and a half million names are read in English, Hebrew and Yiddish, and it takes over 6 months just to complete the list. It's very sad.

**Tuesday - Day 9**

On the last day, we went down to what is called 'Genesis Land', which is located half way between Jerusalem and Bethel. There we dressed up in robes, and a man going by the name of Eliezer took us on a camel trek into the desert (five minutes down the road!) to meet his master Abraham. When we arrived, Eliezer bade us call for Abraham and sure enough, Abraham appeared to greet his guests who had travelled over "3800 years" to visit him. He gave us water to wash our hands, and brought us into his tent. He then told us the story of how he had left his family in Iraq to travel to the promised land. He offered us dates, figs and raisins to eat. The dates were very nice. Then we said goodbye to Abraham, and mounted our camels to travel, as Abraham put it, "back to the future". Alas, no sign of any Rebecca when I returned! The camels were beautiful animals. They didn't spit or bite, but were very tame. You do need to be careful when mounting them though, as they get up on their hind legs first, and you can fall off if you aren't holding on tight. It takes a few minutes to get used to the way they walk, but it is a very comfortable way to travel, and a very enjoyable experience.

Then we went to Qumran, which is the place were the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered. We didn't have a lot of time to spend here, and to be honest it isn't really worth going to unless you are planning to take a hike up into the mountains to see some of the actual caves. After this we went to the Dead Sea for a float. There were no changing rooms to speak of, just one large room for the men and one large room for the women. Floating in the sea was an enjoyable experience once you got used to the cool temperature of the water, but you are only permitted to stay in for around fifteen minutes as the salt can affect your heart rate. The experience was not really that much different from our own sea, apart from the fact that you float better in it. But

you do need to be careful that the salt water doesn't get into your eyes. Some of it got into the dry skin on my chin and it was quite stingy.

**Wednesday - Day 10**

We had to get up at 2am the next morning, as our flight to Prague had been scheduled for 6am. So we headed back to Ben Gurion airport. The check-in took quite a while, as our luggage had to go through the x-ray machines, and even then, many of our cases had to be opened to be manually checked by airport staff. One girl in another group complained at having to open her case again, and because of that, the airport staff went through everything that was in it. So if you are travelling to Israel, just co-operate with them and everything will be alright. We had planned to hire a bus to take us on a tour of Prague, but we couldn't find one that was big enough to the whole group. So we had to wait five hours for the next flight to Dublin. And from there we boarded our bus to Belfast. It was very emotional saying goodbye to all the friends we had made on the trip. I will miss them greatly, as we all got along so well. I think I will go back to Israel again some day. Now I know what to expect. I would probably do a few things differently though. I would spend more time in visiting the sites where we know events in the Bible took place. And I wouldn't spend so much time visiting the various Orthodox and Catholic churches, which are merely shrines to places and not to the Person of our Lord Jesus Christ. But Israel is a beautiful country, and I would definitely recommend it to anyone. Shalom!