

Again, while lacking Christian biblical reference, according to local tradition this area was visited by Jesus where he left a miraculous facial portrait on the “handkerchief” of a local leader he had gone to visit.

(A note: The gospels limit their stories and insights about Jesus to Israel and the immediate surrounding area. However there is nothing that would preclude him having traveled elsewhere.)

I found many of the legends in Urfa about Abraham, Job and Jesus himself extremely interesting but the restraints of these writings make it impossible to go into the details of these stories.

After spending the morning visiting caves and climbing the 381 stairs of an ancient fortress, we again boarded our bus – this time to visit Harran, one of the sights I had been most anticipating.

According to Genesis 11:31-12:5, Terah (Abraham’s father) “took Abram...from Ur...to go into the land of Canaan; but when they came to Harran they settled there. ... Terah died in Haran ... So Abram went, as the Lord had told him, ... he departed from Harran ... and took his wife ... and all his possessions...that they had gathered in Harran ... and went forth to the land of Canaan”

And finally, on the seventh day of our trip we were heading to the city from which the salvation of mankind was launched.

The forty-five minute bus ride from Urfa to Harran was somewhat rough, partially due to the fact that a newer road was under construction along side and partially on top of the old road. Nevertheless we were glad we were in a bus and not on foot.



**Beehive houses in Harran**

**Until recently these were inhabited by people.**

**Today they are used to store grain and stable livestock.**

Unlike other areas that we had visited that abounded in a wealth of ruins, excavations and reconstruction, Harran was, for the most part, void of visible archeological remains. Not only was archeological work not evident, but also missing were the usual tourists “amenities”. There were no signs or markers explaining the remains. There were no souvenir shops (though a few local merchants had some of their wares under a make-shift tent). There were no books for purchase to explain the importance of these ancient remains (something that I missed, being an avid collector of information about historic and cultural details). Even the book that the

local guide referenced, though only a couple of years old, was out of print. At first I missed these things, but after a while their absence made what few ancient ruins remained, all the more interesting.



**Ruins of ancient castle/fortress**

The main visible ancient edifice of the area was an old castle/fortress. From the outside this citadel looked more like a very large pile of rectangular rocks from a kids play ground. But upon entering the ruins of this three-plus story structure, we found ourselves faced with the stark reality of life centuries ago. On the lower floor we entered rooms which had stabled horses and other animals (as this had once been used as a resting place for travelers). On the upper levels were smaller rooms – more suitable for small groups of people.



Approaching the outer walls one could look down on the approaching roadway through one of a number of archer's windows – long narrow openings through which a defender of the fortress could take aim at the enemy. Looking out one of these windows one could see the ruins of the Ulu Cami (an ancient mosque flanked by a single minaret) This 8th century center of worship and study in the Islamic world is believed to be the first university in Turkey.



Reaching the top of one of the towers (made interesting by the fact that there was a hole in the floor large enough for a person to easily slip through – and no barriers along the edge to keep one from taking a three story step downward) looking to the south, we had a fascinating view of the flat barren land broken by several tells – flat-top small hills that mark the ruins of other ancient communities. We were only about eight miles from the Syrian border and we were told that on a clear night (which is most nights there) one could see the glow of the lights of several small Syrian towns.



Exactly where had Abraham and Sarah and their families lived? Somewhere in this barren area, but not even the locals had a clue as to the precise location.

**Looking to the south toward Syria one can see several tells which mark the ruins of ancient communities.**

Late in the afternoon of day seven, we boarded our bus once again and began retracing our path along the rough dusty road that had brought us to Harran. Our group was exhausted from what had been one of the busiest days of the trip, but our day was far from over. Returning to Urfa we had dinner with two local families (our group was



divided so not as to overwhelm one family). Upon entering the high-rise in which our host family lived (most Turkish families today live in high-rise apartments which, from a distance, give a garden-like appearance to the hilly landscape), we took the elevator to the sixth floor. There were two apartments there – one on either side of the hallway. Our host family lived in the one on the right. Entering their home we removed our shoes, as is the custom, and everyone was provided with a

pair of house slippers. Immediately after that one of the daughters of our host offered us rosewater to wash our hands, another ancient custom of the area. In spite of the language difference we managed to communicate rather well and our Turkish translator found himself with not much to do. Typically, it wasn't long until all the women disappeared into the kitchen.

Soon after, dinner was ready and we all sat at the table and were served by the young daughters of our host, who seemed more than honored to be of service to the family's guests. Once served, there was an awkward moment of silence as we waited for our host to start eating. It was then that Veysel, the Turkish graduate student from UTSA who had arranged our trip, informed us quietly that we should begin eating, since it was the tradition in Turkey that the host would not begin until after his guest had started. After the meal our host family thanked us for joining them, using a traditional phrase which, loosely translated, says, "*thank you for lending us your tongues*". But the hospitality of our host was not yet over. Before leaving we were each presented with a gift -- a small, long narrow silver tray with a silver cruet, identical to the one our host's daughter had used to sprinkle rose-water on our hands when we had entered the house. And so this sign of Turkish hospitality would return with each of us to the States.

After an enjoyable two hours with our sponsor family (which was far too short) it was back onto the bus for an evening ride to our next destination. Conversation on the bus dwindled when most dozed off as nightfall had overtaken us. I remember waking briefly as we crossed a long bridge that spanned the Euphrates River, a river not much shorter than our own *Mighty Mississippi*. I only wish it had been daylight. I would like to have had a better view of these flowing waters of such biblical importance.

It was almost midnight when we arrived in Gaziantep. Arriving at the hotel we were met by several families associated with the Gulen movement who had come to greet us. They seemed disappointed that we had arrived at such a late hour and they would not be able to spend time with us that evening. We quickly settled down in our hotel rooms for a good night's sleep.

### **Return to Istanbul**

We woke up again after a rather short night's sleep. It must have been the adrenalin and the excitement that kept us going. After an early breakfast at the hotel and a brief visit with the members of the Gulen movement who had greeted us the night before (I was impressed that after greeting us at such a late hour the night before they would return so early to join us for breakfast), we headed to the airport for a morning flight back to Istanbul.

Back in Istanbul, we checked into the hotel where we had spent the first night of our trip. It was hard to believe, but we were now going to spend three nights in the same hotel, in the same room, in the same bed.

By now it was lunch time (meals did seem to come often during the trip) and we enjoyed traditional Turkish cuisine at a local restaurant. Then it was off again to absorb more of this country's culture and history.

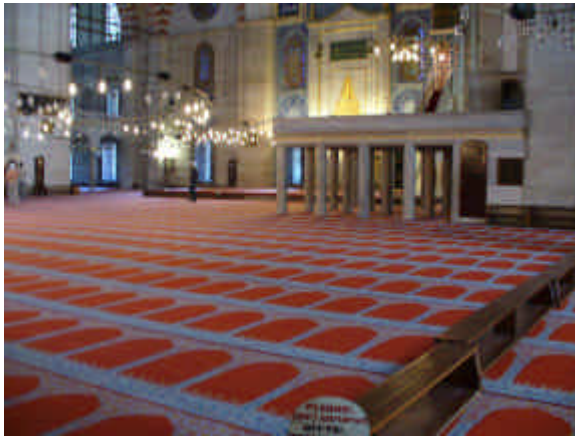
We spent the afternoon visiting the **Chora Museum** and the **Suleymaniye Mosque**.



**One of the many frescos inside the Chora**

The Chora Museum, originally the Church of the Holy Savior Outside the Walls, was built in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. The present building was rebuilt in the 11<sup>th</sup> century and the majority of the frescos and mosaics that it houses, which are some of the best Byzantine art in the area, date back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The Chora is one of the two churches that were turned into mosques when the Ottoman's captured Constantinople. By that time, due to earthquakes and general neglect, the building had fallen into considerable disrepair. Muslims forbid representations of people and living things in their houses of worship, so when the Ottomans took over they whitewashed over the mosaics

and frescos inside. Over the centuries, their existence was forgotten. After the Ataturk revolution in the 1920's restorers rediscovered the art, preserved as if in a time capsule.



**Inside the Suleymaniye Mosque**

The Suleymaniye Mosque, dating to the mid sixteenth century, is the largest mosque in Istanbul. It was built by Sultan Suleyman I ("Sulyman the Magnificent"), the richest and most powerful Sultan of the Ottoman empire. It's architect, Sinan, had headed the restoration of the Hagia Sophia (see above) and the influence of its design on this new structure is more than evident. Inside the mosque one is impressed by its size and its simplicity. Tiles and colored glass bring harmony to this place of prayer and silence.

Sultan Suleyman I also undertook a number of major construction projects throughout his empire, among which was the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem (which was a part of the Ottoman empire in the first part of the 16<sup>th</sup>. century).

That evening we again had dinner with another host family from the Gulen movement, listening to stories and learning more about this country's contemporary culture.

By the days end and up to this point in our trip, we had visited many historical cities and landmarks, many of which I had looked forward to. But my personal highlight of the trip would come unexpectedly on the following day, with the viewing of several relics.

On the second to the last day of our trip we got to sleep in, or so it seemed since we woke 15-20 minutes later than usual. We boarded our bus before breakfast as we would be eating as guests of the staff of the Sema hospital, about which I wrote in earlier. After touring this state-of-the-art medical facility of the Gulen movement, we had "tea" at the *Camlica Tepesi*, a garden on the top of a mountain in eastern Istanbul that overlooks the Bosphorus Straits and the ancient city of Constantinople. It was here that some of the women of our group met some teenage schoolgirls who had "skipped classes" in celebration of the Muslim conquest of Turkey (not an official holiday, but one nonetheless observed by many). Once again the language barrier seemed not to exist as they compared steps of Jewish-American and Turkish folk dances. The jovious moment was briefly interrupted when one of the girls received a call on her cell phone from her teacher asking why the group was not present for a test. The girls decided to continue their cultural exchange, saying they would deal with the school issues on the following day. We wished them luck.



**Sharing some folk dance steps  
with local teens**