

Sisters for Yah

The Biblical Land of Turkey

(By Sister Debbie Reed)

Nowhere in the Bible is the country of Turkey mentioned. Or is it? Incredibly, the land that is now Turkey was the location for many people and events in Biblical history.

Turkey, as a nation by that name, only came into existence in 1923, just after WWI with the fall of the Ottoman Empire. This land is where the Tigris and Euphrates rivers begin and was a key trades crossroad in the ancient world. Often referred to as “Asia Minor” in the Scriptures, Turkey was at the heart of civilization, trade, and consequently, Biblical history. Much of modern Turkey once belonged to Greece, but this is not generally known, even to the most seasoned

Biblical scholars. Actually, many of the familiar stories in the Old Testament took place in what is now Turkey, and much of the New Testament was either written on Turkish soil or to the assemblies in Turkey, and not in the country of Greece we know today.



day. In fact, there are arguably more Greek and Roman ruins in Turkey than in either Greece or Italy.

Colorful and diverse, Turkey is an enthralling land. The Hittites, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, and Ottomans, along with lesser-known cultures, invaded, conquered, flourished, and left ruins of their once mighty empires for us to behold with curiosity and awe. A cradle of civilization, the traces of mankind’s religious journey throughout history are evident in the pagan temples, Christian basilicas, and Muslim mosques that are scattered throughout the cities and countryside.

While Ankara is the capital of Turkey, Istanbul is the largest city with approximately fifteen million people. Once known as Constantinople, Istanbul lies partially in Europe and partially in Asia. A city of stark contrasts where East meets West, modern and ancient exist in a harmonious, exotic land.

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Lavish sultans' palaces vie for attention with ancient basilicas or underground Roman cisterns. And while the whirling dervishes and Hittite folk dancers of antiquity still entertain tourists, the brightly-lit, modern nightlife of Taksim rivals that of any international city with its restaurants, music and dancing. Women sporting the latest European hairstyles and fashions stroll down the boulevards or narrow, stone passageways next to women wearing long dresses and colorful scarves or, more rarely, others attired from head to toe in black burqas with face veils. Bazaars that have existed for hundreds of years are still doing a brisk business of selling everything from spices to jewelry to oriental rugs, yet one can buy an iPod at a store nearby with money obtained at the ATM. And though the thick, sweet Turkish coffee is readily available, tea is hospitably offered everywhere—especially to tourists shopping for souvenirs.

Traveling down the Aegean coast from Istanbul in northwest of Turkey to the Datca Peninsula where the Aegean meets the Mediterranean in the southwest, one first comes upon the cemeteries of Gallipoli, the site of the famous WWI battle. These cemeteries stand as silent monuments to clashes between culture and ideologies down through the ages. An additional hour's drive south reveals the ruins of Troy, location of Homer's epic *Iliad* where Trojans and Greeks fought over the beautiful Helen. All along the way, ancient olive groves, some having trees as old as 2,000 years, cover the mountains and hillsides for hundreds of miles flanking fields of wild red poppies that delightfully litter the valleys with their breathtaking beauty. Further down the coast, the ruins of a temple to the pagan goddess Athena appear on top of the cliff overlooking the small fishing village of Assos. The ancient philosopher Aristotle lived and taught there during the 3rd century BCE and the Apostle Paul walked to Assos from Troas (Troy) on his third missionary journey (Acts 20:13, 14). Next, one comes upon the city of Izmir, the former "Smyrna" of the Apostle John's Revelation (Rev. 2:8-11). Today, Izmir is a thriving, modern city of over four million inhabitants and a favorite tourist destination. Further south, one comes to a little-known, yet astonishing archeological site known as Knidos, a city that was once a bustling international seaport with a population of over 80,000 people several thousand years ago. In fact, almost every Turkish village has nearby ruins of ancient, prehistoric civilizations.

In the Old Testament, the city of Haran, where Abraham and his family lived for a time after leaving Ur, was located in the area now known as Turkey, as well as Mt. Ararat, the place where Noah's ark landed. The Hittite civilization, mentioned often in the Old Testament, was a dominant force in this land around 2000 BCE. Today's Kurds, most of whom live in Turkey, are believed to be the descendants of the once-powerful Assyrians, the people who conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

But what is perhaps most surprising to many is that much of the New Testament apostles, assemblies, and activities, were located in the present country of Turkey. Many, if not most, of the early assemblies were located on Turkish soil. Antioch, now called Antakya, is located in southeastern Turkey and is known as the Cradle of Christianity. Once part of the Roman province of Syria, Antioch is said to have been the second most important city to Christians, the first being Jerusalem and was the place to which many fled in the persecution that followed the stoning of Stephen. For a year, Barnabas and Paul taught great numbers of people at Antioch and it was there that the disciples were first called "Christians" (Acts 11:26). (Editors note; possibly called *Messianic* in Hebrew. It appears that "*Christian*" was a derogatory term).

The Apostle Paul was born in Tarsus, a city in southern Turkey, and Timothy was from Lystra, not far from Tarsus. Most of Paul's ministry took place in Turkey, as well.

Almost his entire first missionary journey was in Turkey (Perga, Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe, and Attalia) as were most of his second and third journeys. Paul wrote his epistle to the Galatians, Ephesians, and Colossians, all assemblies in Turkey. He preached at Perga, Troas, Assos, Ephesus, and many other cities there. The Apostle Peter wrote his first epistle to assemblies scattered throughout the Turkish provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, Bythina.

After Yahshua's death, the Apostle John took Yahshua's mother, Mary, with him from Jerusalem to Ephesus, where he headed the assembly established there. Today the ruins of St. John's Basilica can be seen at Selcuk, a town near Ephesus. John cared for Mary, as Yahshua had commanded him,, until his imprisonment on Patmos (a Greek island off the Turkish coast) where he spent his remaining years in exile. It was on Patmos that John had a vision and wrote the Book of Revelation which contained letters to the seven Assemblies — Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea—all in present day Turkey. According to local tradition, after John was banned to Patmos, the Assembly at Ephesus built a house for Mary. and looked after her until her death. The original foundations are still there, the house itself having been rebuilt in the 6th or 7th century.

As New Testament faith began to spread through the teachings of Paul, John, Peter, and the other apostles, the Roman emperor, Nero, persecuted



the newly-converted believers unmercifully. To escape torture and death, many fled to the provinces in central Turkey. Capadocia is one such place where at least one hundred underground cities, built by early believers for protection, may be visited today. In addition to the cities, many ornate cathedrals, complete with elaborate Biblical scenes painted on ceilings and walls, can be found in caves nearby.

The Byzantine age began in 330 CE under the leadership of Constantine. He established his capital at Byzantium and renamed it Constantinople (modern Istanbul). It was the newly-converted Constantine who brought Christianity to his new empire. Prior to Constantine's conquest, the people had worshiped a pantheon of Greek and then Roman pagan gods and goddesses. So, in order to consolidate the empire, it was necessary to convert the population to Christianity. The Hagia Sophia, the most magnificent of Byzantine churches and considered to be the eighth wonder of the world, is situated in Istanbul. Built in 532 CE as a Christian church, it was converted to a Muslim mosque in 1453, and declared a museum in 1934. It stands as a testament to the power and architectural genius of the Byzantine period.

Today the population of Turkey is 98% Muslim. The Ottoman Turks conquered the decaying Byzantine Empire in 1453, replacing Christianity with Islam. The Ottoman Empire was one of the largest and longest lasting empires in history. Inspired and sustained by Islam, and Islamic institutions, it spread from the Eastern Mediterranean, the Middle East, North Africa, the Balkans, and into Spain. The Ottoman sultans ruled Turkey for than 500 years until defeated by the British in WWI. The new constitution of 1923, created by the much-revered leader, Atatürk, brought about the secularization of modern Turkey. If all this is news to you, you are not alone. Second only to Israel, Turkey's prominence in the scriptural history validated it as an important place to visit for serious students of the Bible. There is so much to do, see, and learn, in this beautiful, intriguing land that a tour of Turkey would definitely be worth the time and expense.

Editor's Note: Next month, we'll learn how to make "real" yogurt!

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AYRAN (TURKISH YOGURT DRINK)

Use plain yogurt made with 2% milk, and NO cream/half and half and NO sugar.

1 cup yogurt
1/4 to 1/2 cup very cold water
(ice water is best)
1/4 t. salt

Mix all of the ingredients in a blender, adjusting the yogurt, water and salt to taste. Delicious!



yummy

YOGURT PARFAIT



3 cups yogurt
1/2 cup heavy cream
1 t. vanilla
1/2 cup brown sugar
Assorted berries and other fruit of your choice

Pour the yogurt into a bowl and add the cream and vanilla. Whisk together until combined and is nice and thick. Sprinkle with brown sugar evenly over the top of the yogurt mixture—DO NOT stir the mixture.

Cover the bowl with plastic wrap or foil and seal tightly. Refrigerate for at least 30 minutes. When ready to serve, place a handful of berries, or other fruit, into individual serving dishes (I use wine glasses—really pretty).

Without stirring the yogurt mixture, spoon the yogurt over the berries. There will be creamy areas and brown sugar areas. Repeat the layers again, ending with the berries on top.

delicious