



Curiosity of the day:

Where Does That River Go?

Whenever Jesus went from the heights in Jerusalem where the Temple stood, to the Mount of Olives, or whenever he went from Jerusalem to the house of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, his friends who lived in Bethany, he had to cross a deep ravine, a cut in the land that went twenty miles from Jerusalem south to the Dead Sea, and that descended 4,000 feet over that course. It was a rugged country! Now you may ask, “How did that cut in the land get there to begin with?”

The answer is that water did it. If you are walking in a forest that you are not familiar with, and you want to find a stream or a lake, your best bet is to go downhill, because that is where the water will go; and if you see off in the distance something that looks like a line or a curve, lower than everything else and lined with trees, you may guess that there’s a stream there, or a river. The stream, over thousands of years, will cut its way through the land, and that’s what happened between the high rocky hills around Jerusalem.



“Does that mean that Jesus had to cross a stream to get from the Temple to the Mount of Olives?” Yes and no. It depends. You see, it doesn’t rain much in that part of the world, and there isn’t much snow, either. During the rainy season, that cut in the land would be running with water, and it might be quite a lot of water too. That is why they called it a brook: it was

the Kidron Brook, or the Wadi Kidron.

What’s a *wadi*? you may ask. It’s a stream bed that’s often without a stream in it.

If you look at a map of the part of the world where Jesus lived, you may see a lot of blue lines and squiggles, sometimes with arrows at the end of them, that don’t seem to go anywhere.

Those are streams that aren’t always streams, and the arrows show the general direction of where they flow when they are running, but how far they get, and sometimes exactly where they are going to be if the land is flat, won’t always be the same from year to year.

“But where does the water end up, when the streams are running?”

The water in the Kidron will usually make it to the Dead Sea. But the water in those other brooks might not make it anywhere. The water flows, and then in the heat the brook gets

shallower and shallower. A lot of the water sinks into the sandy earth below. The rest of it evaporates and returns to the air around us. At that point there is no brook at all. It has emptied into nowhere.

You can't drink the water in the Dead Sea, because it is so salty, it would make you ill. All the mineral salts that the Jordan River washes from the rocks it flows past dissolve into the water and are carried into the Dead Sea, where they stay, more than a thousand feet below the level of the Mediterranean Sea that is less than a hundred miles away. The Hebrews called it the Sea of Salt, but sometimes also the Sea of Death, since its waters are too salty for anything to live in it. If you walk along its shores, you can find milky white pebbles, shaped like ovals. They are all salt. Or you can pick up stone pebbles encased in small clear or whitish slabs of salt.

You'd think that people would want to stay far away from that place, but already in the time of Jesus, they had the idea that the water and the air around it and the slimy black asphalt that sometimes burps up from the ground nearby were good for your health, and it is true that the dry hot air there is good for you if you are suffering diseases of the lungs. But you may also remember the words we say in the psalm: "He leads me by streams of living waters." That did not mean stagnant lakes of salt water.

The "living water" is fresh and flowing freely and good to drink. If you were lost in the wilderness in that part of the world, you'd be on the lookout for any fresh stream, and if you found one, chances are that there would be good grass around it for your horse, your cattle, or your sheep, and wild flowers, and fig trees and grapevines.

That is why Jesus says that whoever follows him will find springs of living water leaping up within him, and those are springs that never fail.

You may wonder whether we in the United States have any rivers that don't go anywhere but into the ground and sky. Yes, we have plenty, in the great dry area that covers most of Nevada and much of Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico. The biggest is the Humboldt River, which flows for almost 300 miles in

Nevada. It springs up near the border of Nevada and Utah, and is fed by streams from the Rocky Mountains, when the snow melts. Then it flows westward, and provides water for ranches along its path, and for the people living in towns along its banks. But it finally disappears, in a great dry lake bed called the Humboldt Sink. So, if you were floating on a boat down the Humboldt River, eventually you'd just get stuck in the sand.



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