

Other books by John Gibbons

TRAMPING TO LOURDES
TRAMPING THROUGH IRELAND
AFOOT IN ITALY
SUBURBAN COLUMBUS
THE TRUTH ABOUT THE LEGION
ABROAD IN IRELAND
PLAYTIME IN PORTUGAL
ROLL ON, NEXT WAR!
WHAT IS THIS LOURDES?
TWENTY-FOUR VAGABOND TALES
ETC., ETC.

THE ROAD TO NAZARETH



THROUGH PALESTINE TODAY

By JOHN GIBBONS

*"I came not to send peace, but a sword."
(St. Matthew, x. 34.)*

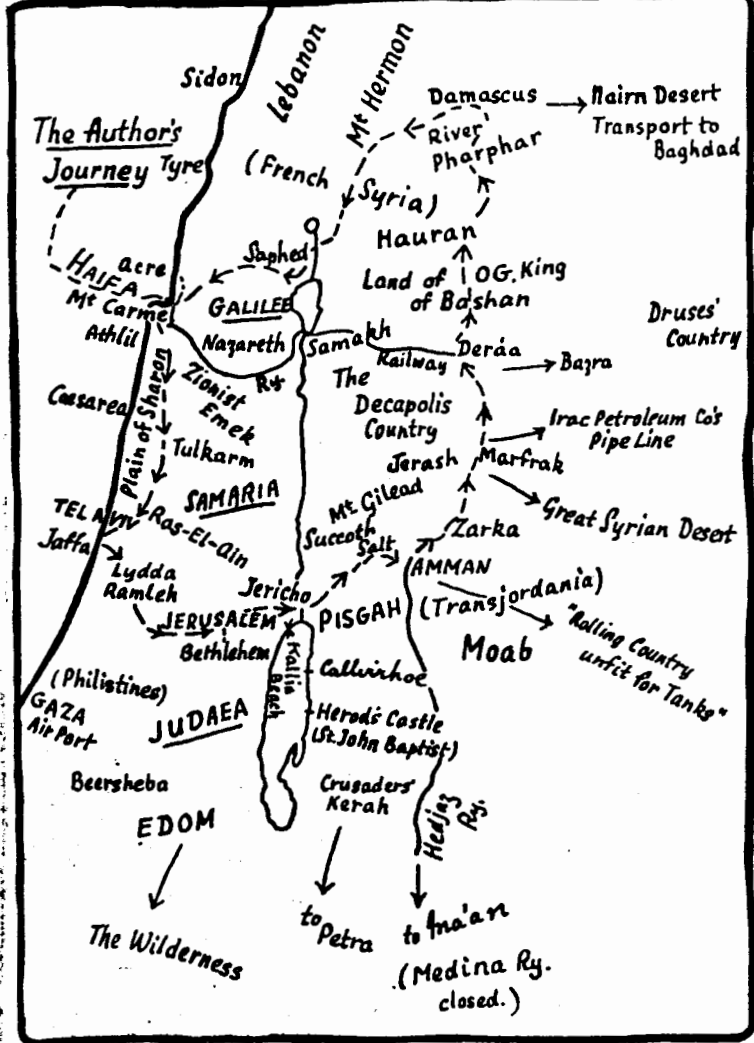
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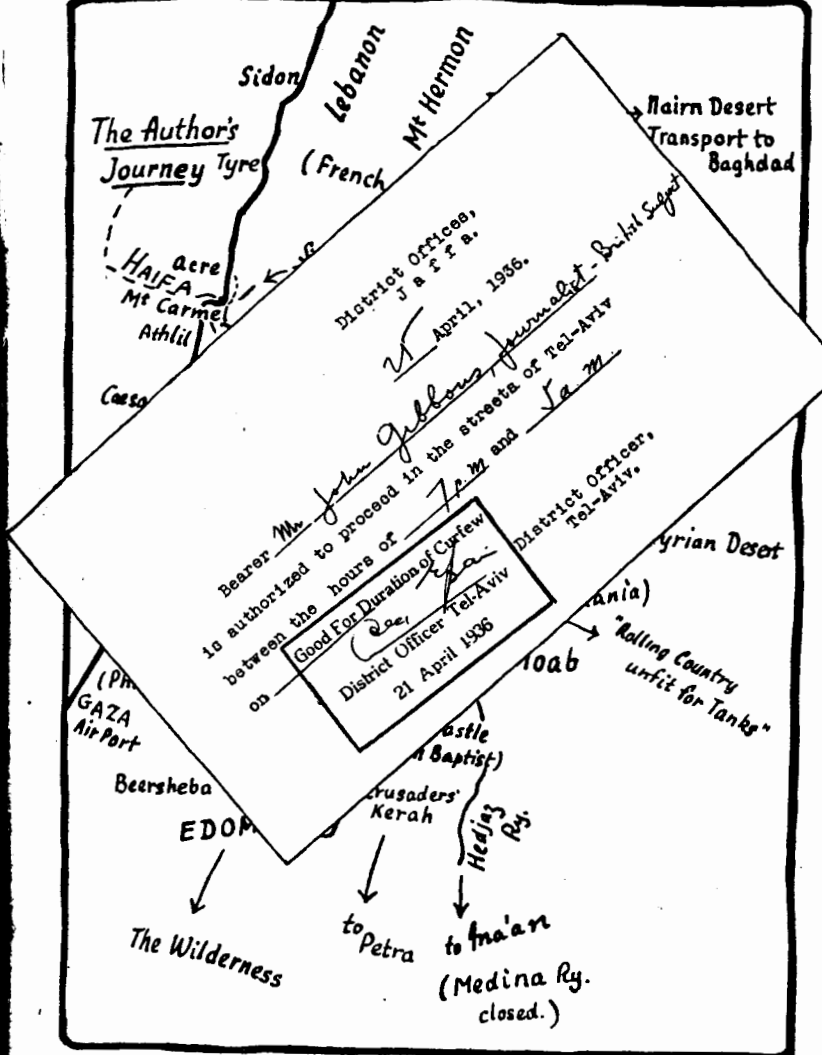
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Since there apparently exists no one map sufficiently and simply illustrating the Old Testament, the New Testament, the Crusaders' Kingdom, Mr. John Gibbons's journeys, modern Zionism, the Palestinian railway system, and in short



the points which the author wanted illustrating, his only resource was to draw his own map. With this explanation he thinks proper to couple an apology for his total inability to draw.

J. G.

What happened about any Arab Jews, I wanted to know; and they said that there could be no such person. There were the old Jews who had been in the Arab countries all the time, and to those the Arabs used to have no particular objection. The Yemen Jew, for instance, they looked upon in the old days as almost one of themselves, and there were even Jew families who were official keepers of the ancient Mosque of Omar in Jerusalem. There have practically always been Jews in Jerusalem. They would pray. They would say the proper prayers for other Jews in far-away countries of the "Dispersion" and would draw some petty fees for it. Those Palestine Jews had been there so long that they had almost been looked upon as Arabs. But to-day the feeling was changing; the new Zionists were adopting all the odds-and-ends of Jewry, and so the Yemen Jew from far Arabia would be all Jew and with no Arabia left. The sides, in fact, were tightening themselves up for the coming battle. All-Arab versus All-Jew, with Great Britain most unfortunately having to keep the ring.

There was a boy who used to hang about the street outside my Haifa hotel, and he would run errands or call a cab or generally do anything that he was told to do. He spoke English quite passably, as well, he said, as German and Hebrew; which is not at all too bad for a small hotel's hanger-on. What on earth was he, I wondered; and "Jew", he said. But when I pressed for further details it was a bit more complicated. "Yemen-Spanish", he said, but when I tried out my bit of Spanish he knew none of my phrase-book words. It was a different Spanish that was spoken in Constantinople, he explained, and perhaps with a Yemen-Jew father who peddles his way from

Arabia to Turkey the language might be a little different. The Spanish-Jew mother might have been anything in Constantinople. There is a whole colony of Spanish Jews out in these parts of the Near East. They came out after the Inquisition in the five-hundreds or so, and you find them as far afield as up at Sarajevo in Bosnia. Here in Palestine they add one more complication to the general issue by not mixing particularly well with the modern Zionist Jews from Germany and America.

In a brief treatment of some of the more elementary divisions of Haifa society one will, of course, be careful not to omit the Persians! Those are the Babists, a religious sect founded in Persia by the mystic who called himself Bab Allah, or the Gate of God. And another name for the creed is Bâhaa, and it means the "Glory of Glories". In a book so cursory as my own I am unable to explain the religion, but roughly it is a sort of mixture of Christianity and Mohammedanism. Even so, it failed to commend itself to the Shah of the Persia of the 1850's, and he executed the Bab and most of his leading disciples. After this the rest of the sect betook itself to Acre in Palestine and later still to Haifa, where the grave of the last Bab is one of the stock sights of the city. That must be one of the most beautiful graves in the world and in one of the most beautiful positions. It is on the slope of Mount Carmel and in an extraordinarily lovely rose-garden with an avenue of palms and of rose-trees pointing straight downwards at the German town and the blue of the Mediterranean. There is a little mausoleum-shrine, and the garden is perfectly kept. Babist funds apparently run to good gardeners, and that Palestine soil round Mount Carmel is of deepest

red and peculiar fertility. The grave is a place of pilgrimage at proper seasons, and there is still a small community of native Babists who visit it. Oddly enough, however, the greater number of the sect's adherents to-day are Americans, and they, too, occasionally get up pilgrimages to come all the way from the far-off States to visit Haifa.

From the Christian stand-point the very essence of Haifa is, of course, Mount Carmel. I must have been hearing of it from childhood, and then, an indifferent scholar myself, I had never even known whereabouts in Palestine it was. Really Carmel is a whole chain of mountains culminating in a headland at the extreme edge of the twenty-miles stretch of Haifa Bay. It is not really particularly high as mountains go, but rising as it does from actual sea-level it stands out from leagues away as a commanding promontory, and there is a light-house built on the top of the monastery. The mountain's surface is simply burrowed with caves, and from the beginning of the world it must have been a natural mountain of refuge. Even to the Moslems the place is Jebel Mar Elias, or the Mountain of St. Elias, the Elijah of the Authorised Version. We get it in the Old Testament with the story of Elijah and the priests of Baal. And the brook Kishon of the Bible is still the Arab "Stream of the Massacre". A Catholic myself, I should give the reference as 3 Kings, but the ordinary reader would reckon it as 1 Kings, xviii; it will probably be best to give future biblical names and references by the accepted Church of England count and spelling. So it was from Carmel that the Prophet's servant observed the small cloud which was to end the drought and save the people. "Go up now, look toward the sea.

And he went up, and looked, and said, There is nothing. And he said, Go again seven times. And it came to pass at the seventh time, that he said, Behold, there ariseth a little cloud out of the sea, like a man's hand" (1 Kings xviii. 43-4). As read in an English school, there doesn't seem much in the story; out there on Mount Carmel you can see exactly how it would happen. It is the same with the Bible names. Ahab and Jezebel, Baal and the brook Kishon, they do not seem natural or even possible in, say, a London suburb. It was something that happened in history and that your elders are bound to teach you. But say those names in a street in even modern Haifa, and they spring suddenly to life. This was my first Palestine city, and for all its modernity of advertisements and sky-scraper buildings it was not such a bad city to see first. I was thinking that in Jerusalem there would be tourists, and that Jaffa would have no Jews and Tel Aviv no Arabs, but here you got everybody. Take a Haifa street and an Arab porter in picturesque rags; add an old-type Jew from the Sephardim quarter all complete with ringlets, and look down one of those lanes in the *souk* and you've got the Bible beginning to sound quite different. It was in Haifa and sitting at a table outside a modern café that I saw my first Palestine funeral. There was a little procession wandering through all the traffic. It was led by a bearded priest who would perhaps be an Armenian; over his head they held an umbrella against that Eastern sun and then behind him were his acolytes and altar-boys, and behind them again the mourners. There was no hearse. Those looked very poor people; they carried their own dead. It was a tiny coffin held by a man who was probably the father. They would be