

Introduction

IN THE MIDDLE OF A vast expanse of farmland, a long, lonely road divides the green pastures. Cows graze lazily behind a small fence on one side of the road, seemingly oblivious to the constant flow of traffic that seems to be disproportionately heavy for a quiet, rural area just a few miles outside of Salisbury. Cars, vans, and tour buses deposit people from all over the world in a hard, paved parking lot, which stands in stark contrast to the soft, green fields surrounding it. Visitors find their way between the vehicles and head toward a place of solemn mystery. They walk around, talk in hushed voices, and take several pictures. Many stop to ask other tourists—strangers all—to take pictures of them against this backdrop so they can have a photographic souvenir. Their visit to this mysterious monument forms a lasting memory. In years to come, they will ponder it, talk about it, and tell their descendants stories about it. This experience is part of each visitor, part of the wealth of significant experiences that shape a person, even though a basic description of this location doesn't seem that impressive. After all, it's just a bunch of rocks, sitting in a field, in the middle of otherwise normal and unspectacular farmland. The same description could be given to any number of places,

none of which most people would remember, let alone travel to. Yet, for anyone who has visited Stonehenge, it is so much more.

Thousands of miles to the southeast, an armada of cruise ships docks at an island off the coast of Mexico's Yucatan peninsula. Once again, thousands of tourists from all over the world have come to see something spectacular and fascinating. Leaving their massive floating cities, they take small boats to the mainland and then climb into the rows of tour buses waiting to take them south along the coast toward a relatively deserted location. As soon as the vehicles reach the gravel parking lot at their destination, tourists stream out of the air-conditioned buses into high heat and heavy humidity. Following the signs, they walk along a dirt road leading into the ancient Mayan ruins of Tulum. Tour guides regale them with stories of the mysterious Mayan civilization while wandering among the ancient stone buildings. Iguanas sunning themselves on nearby rocks watch as many of the tourists choose to swim in the warm, clear Caribbean waters or sun themselves on the small beach at the base of the cliff under the watchful eyes of the old, ruined village stretched out along the top. Near the center of the cliff top stands the most recognizable feature of the village: the ancient temple. It is a large, tall, pyramid-shaped building—the tallest of any nearby—and it sits in a place of prominence as it rises above the rest of the abandoned village. Crowds gather before it and listen raptly to the tales of mystical rituals and sacrifice. As they make their way past the souvenir shops back toward the parking lot, descendants of the ancient Mayans re-enact a ritual common to the lives of their ancestors. They climb a tall pole, sing, and dance, hoping to entertain and educate the many visitors that pass by and stop to watch. Like Stonehenge, it is a place where modern humans meet the mysterious past, and it leaves a mark on those who visit.

In the Middle East, visitors and religious faithful climb mountains of shared Jewish, Christian, and Islamic history, and in doing so, they

retrace the footsteps of ancient heroes and prophets. The Mounts of Sinai, Tabor, and Zion are classic travel destinations for those interested in the religious aspects of what many refer to as the Holy Land. For curious visitors, these mountains are more than just large, elevated swaths of land raised high by the ancient forces of tectonic collision; they impart a sense of something else, something more than just rock and soil. Whatever that something is, it touches human experience today even as it did long ago for the early forefathers of the theistic faiths, and it evokes much of the same experience: the solemn, the mysterious, and the sacred.

Encountering the Sacred

The impact of these experiences on visitors is not necessarily isolated to a particular cultural inheritance, geographic locale, expression of faith, or any other method that distinguishes and separates people. Humanity in general is open to and deeply affected by sacred places, spirituality, and religion. The ancient, sacred locations just mentioned are only a few examples out of many thousands found throughout the world. In every place that modern humans discover these sacred sites, people venerate and visit them as places of historical, anthropological, and mystical value. For some people, the mystical or spiritual aspect makes them feel uneasy, particularly theists who don't share the same religious views as the ancient people who constructed these sites. Nonetheless, these monuments exist as evidence of prolific religious thought and behavior among the generations of people that lived and died long before our time. While some people may view these places strictly as historical footnotes of religions long since dead or dormant, other modern people still value them as relevant to their spiritual lives. Stonehenge is an example of this: many modern druids and neo-pagans revere the sacred site as a place of power, particularly during the solstices. While Stonehenge is unique in terms of recognition and preservation, there are hundreds of stone circles and megaliths⁵ found throughout Europe, and many more found

throughout the rest of the world. Scholars from various fields debate their exact use and value ad nauseam; however, in ages past, people clearly valued these sites for religious purposes (as well as for more mundane and practical purposes). The myriad of mystical locations throughout the world is a testament to the value, prevalence, and power of the supernatural experience in ancient cultures, even though many people living today don't generally value these religious experiences, practices, or rituals to the same extent. Instead, modern expressions of faith often focus more on the logical, rational, and methodical aspects of faith. While this shift in mindset is understandable given society's increasing emphasis on scientific methodologies, Christians should not forget that the people in the stories of the Bible probably found the very essence of interaction with God to be very mystical and seemingly non-rational. For example, the burning bush and the voice of God speaking to Moses on Mt. Sinai probably seemed a bit odd if viewed strictly within the rational, logical, and philosophical framework many people embrace today. The heroes of the Christian faith certainly experienced mystical situations that went far beyond a list of rules, guidelines, and strictly rational experiences. They experienced the supernatural: Abraham hosted heavenly visitors (Genesis 18). Elijah called to God and fire came down to consume a sacrifice (1 Kings 18). Peter walked on water (Matthew 14), witnessed miraculous healings (Acts 3), and observed the Transfiguration (Mark 9). Paul encountered the resurrected Christ on the road to Damascus, and later he wrote about what appears to be his direct experience of heaven (Acts 9; 2 Corinthians 12:2-4). A comprehensive list of similar experiences in the Bible would be enormous. These heroes of our typically logical and rational faith appear to have valued and embraced these mystical experiences despite how uncommon, unusual, and unscientific these occurrences were. We should recognize these experiences as significant to both the ancient people in the Bible and to those of us who read the Bible today.

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But, as we start to look at the symbols, myths, and rituals in the Bible, let's start by making it clear we're *not* discussing some secret, hidden doctrine or new theology. When a teacher claims his doctrine is available only to the initiated, select few, or when the doctrine claims to have a hidden, secret meaning revealed via personal revelation, mystical practices, or deciphered codes, then that is a big, bold warning sign of a teaching that is *not* biblically true. Don't walk—run away—and don't return! We're certainly not headed in that direction with this study. Nevertheless, the ancient myths, symbols, and rituals we may not fully understand are indeed part of the Bible that God has given to us, so we are going to analyze these unfamiliar and entertaining topics so that we can understand them. Grab your favorite drink, settle into a comfortable chair, and let's start this fascinating journey!