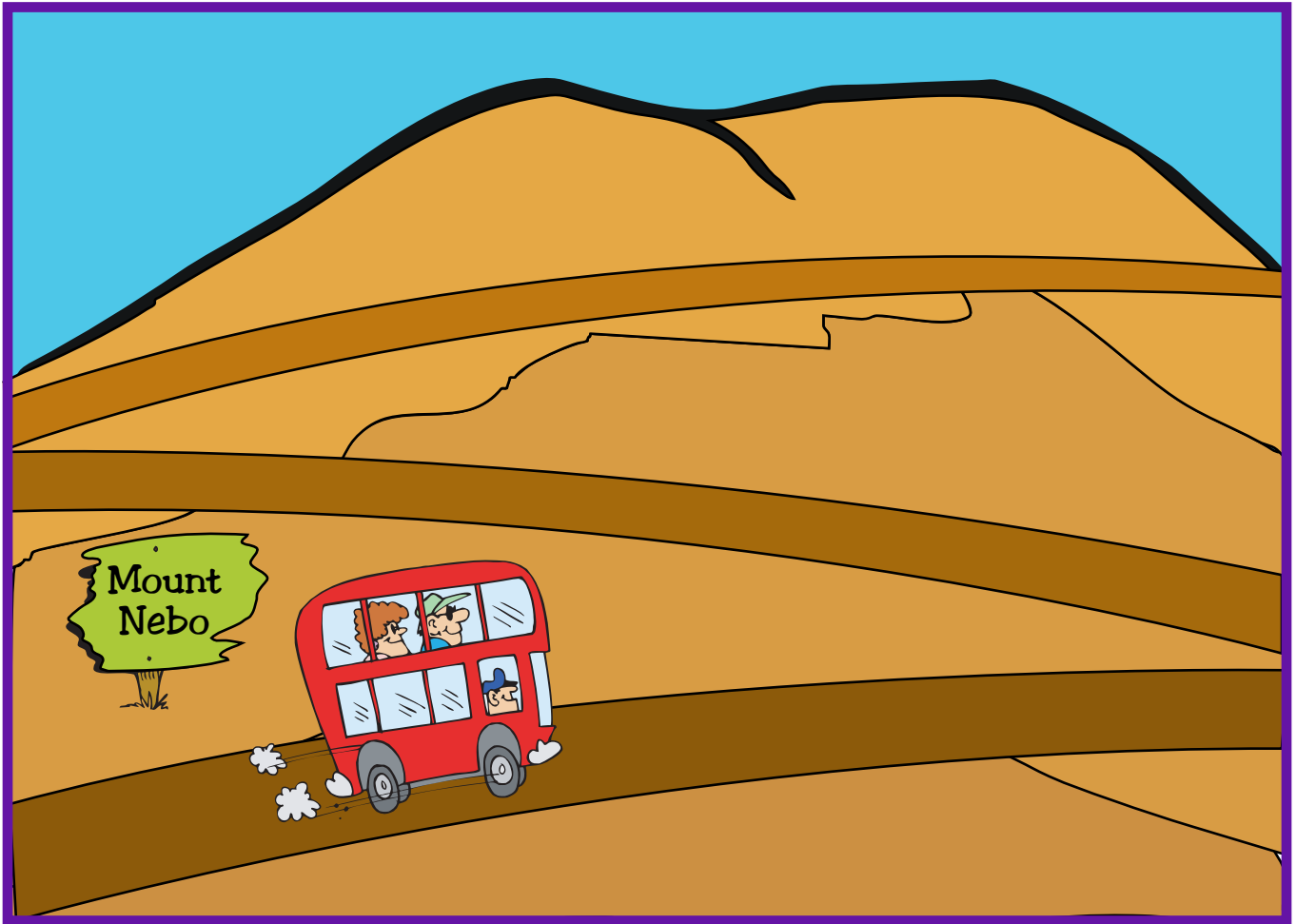
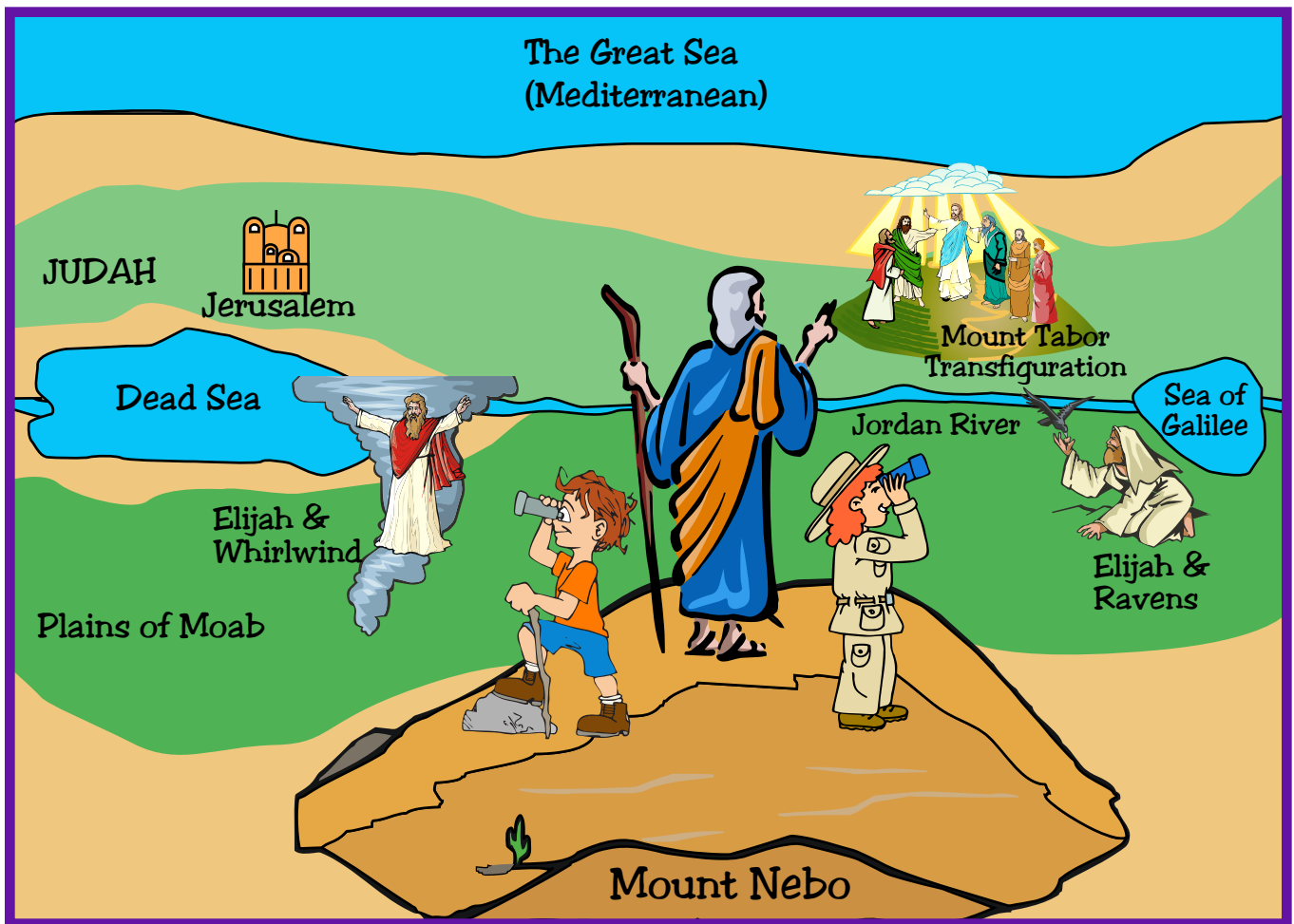


Tour of the Holy Lands - Moab

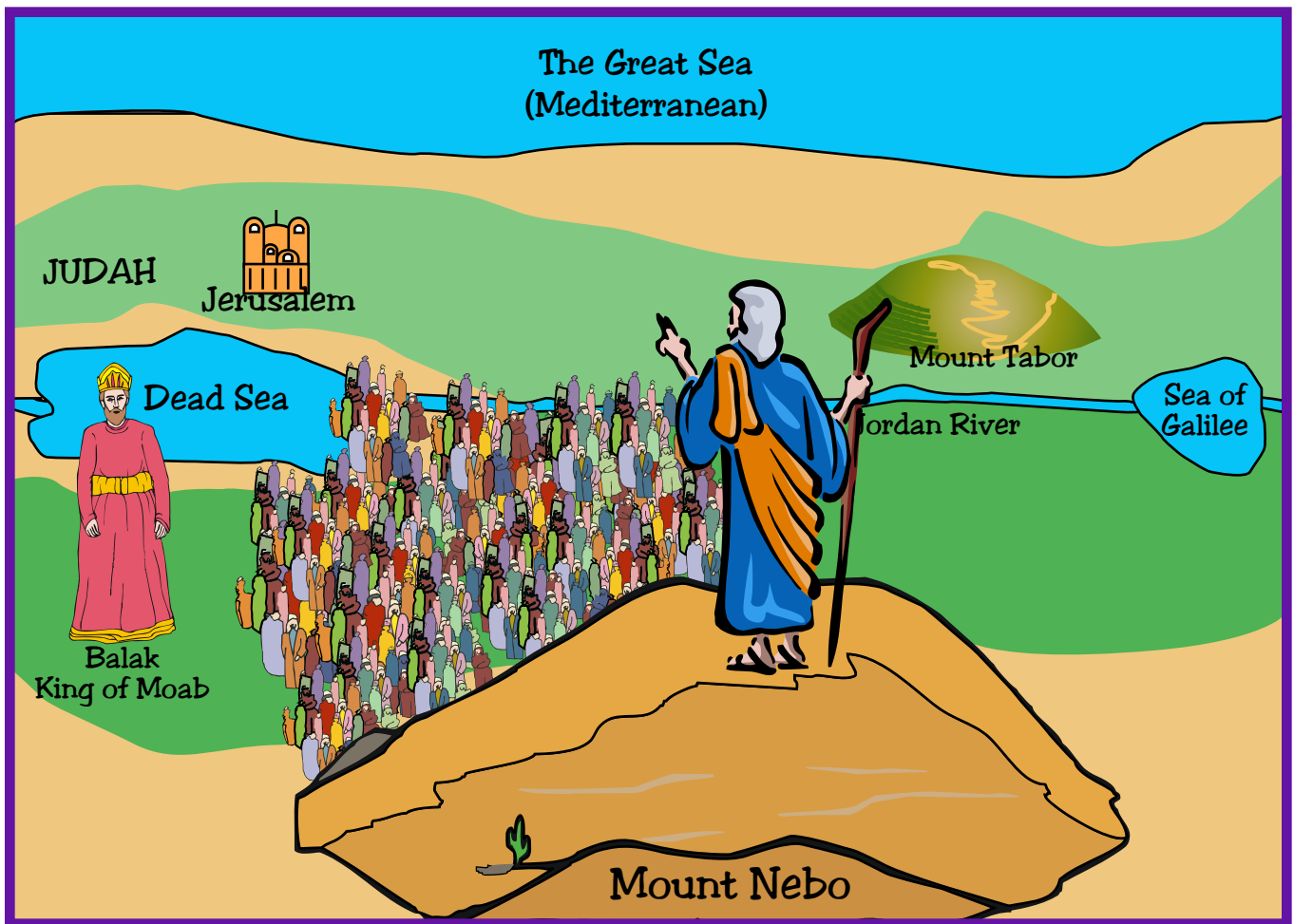


We left the hotel in Amman, Jordan and drove into the countryside. Soon we were on our way up one of the most famous mountains in the world, Mount Nebo, on the mountain range called Mount Pisgah. As for Moses, after 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, he and the children of Israel finally arrived at the edge of the Promised Land. Soon they would cross over the Jordan River. Moses would no longer lead them. Instead, Joshua would lead them. Moses climbed up here for his one and only look at the new land.

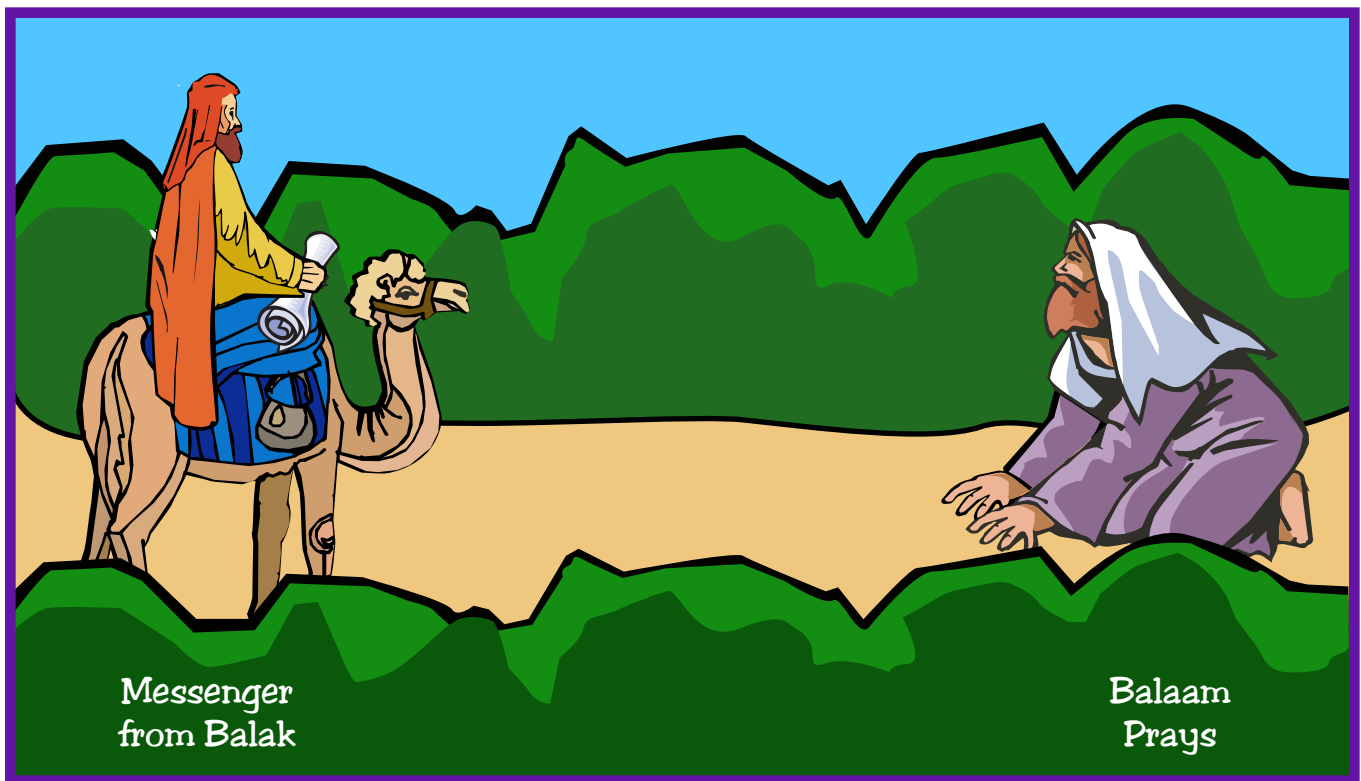


We now step out on that same mountaintop with the same view. The Bible draws us a word picture which spans 160 miles from North to South. We point and say, “Look, there’s Mount Tabor - the place of the Transfiguration. Look, there's the place where Elijah went up in a whirlwind.” Moses saw it, too. At 120 years old, his eyesight was still good and he was still strong, but he would never walk in that land. Was he disappointed? Maybe, but he had finished what he started. He had led his people to the Promised Land.

The Bible says that Moses was buried in a nearby valley. But the tomb was never found. Some say that, like Elijah, Moses never saw death.
(Deuteronomy 34:1-12)



Before his death, Moses could see his people - thousands of them - camped below in the land of Moab. (Numbers 22-24) Balak, the king of Moab, saw them too and it scared him. He feared they were so strong, that they would overpower his people. In truth, the Israelites had no plans to fight. They just wanted to cross the river.



But in his panic, the king decided he would get help from a famous wise man from Mesopotamia called Balaam. Balaam served both the God who was good and the gods who were evil. In fact, he practiced divination, a sort of magic, which was strongly forbidden by the one God. Balaam was known far and wide for his blessings and cursings. Those blessed were blessed and those cursed were cursed. To bless is to speak good. To curse is to speak evil. Balak sent him a message. “Come curse the Israelites.” Balaam prayed all night. In the morning, God gave his answer, “Do not go to the land of Moab to curse the Israelites because I have already blessed them.”

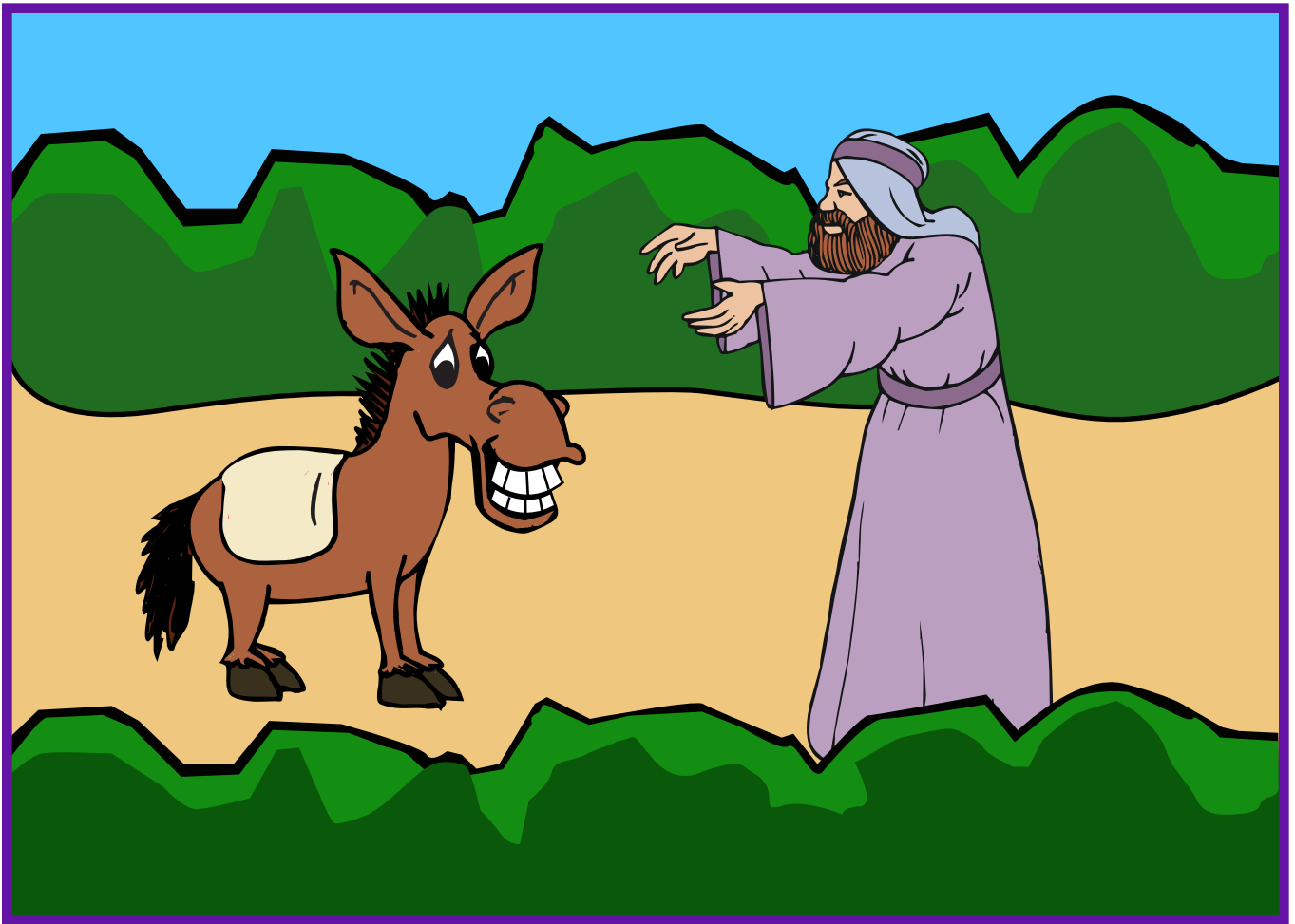
Balak tried again. This time he offered a very high price. But Balaam said: “No, I will not curse them, not even for a palace filled with gold and silver.” That should have been his final answer, but it wasn’t. He returned to the Lord that night. We ask each other, “Did he want those riches after all? Did he think he could change God’s mind?” God said, “Okay, go to Moab, but be sure to do only what I tell you to do.”



In the morning, Balaam saddled his donkey. On the way, the Lord became angry and sent an angel with a sword to stop him, maybe because Balaam loved riches. Balaam couldn't see the angel, but the donkey could and jumped off the road. But Balaam beat her back onto the road again. This time the angel stood at a narrow place in the road. The donkey squirmed past and crushed Balaam's foot. Balaam beat her again. The angel came a third time and blocked the road completely. The poor donkey lay down on the road in fear of another beating. Sure enough she was beaten a third time.



We love the donkeys here. Their steady feet can handle rough hills and rocky roads. They were ridden by Bible heroes, and they're popular today, too. If we were riding that donkey, would it take us *that* long to realize that God was trying to send us a message? We saw a shepherd on a donkey talking on a cell phone. He might hear God call him. Balaam's donkey had better eyes and ears than Balaam did.



The Lord finally got Balaam's attention? How? The donkey talked!

She said, "What have I done to make you beat me three times?"

He said, "Because you made me look foolish. If I had a sword I'd kill you."

The donkey said, "But have I ever done anything like this in my whole life?"



Then all of a sudden Balaam realized that he had a talking donkey. Impossible! And that there was an angel in the road who said, “Why did you beat your donkey?”

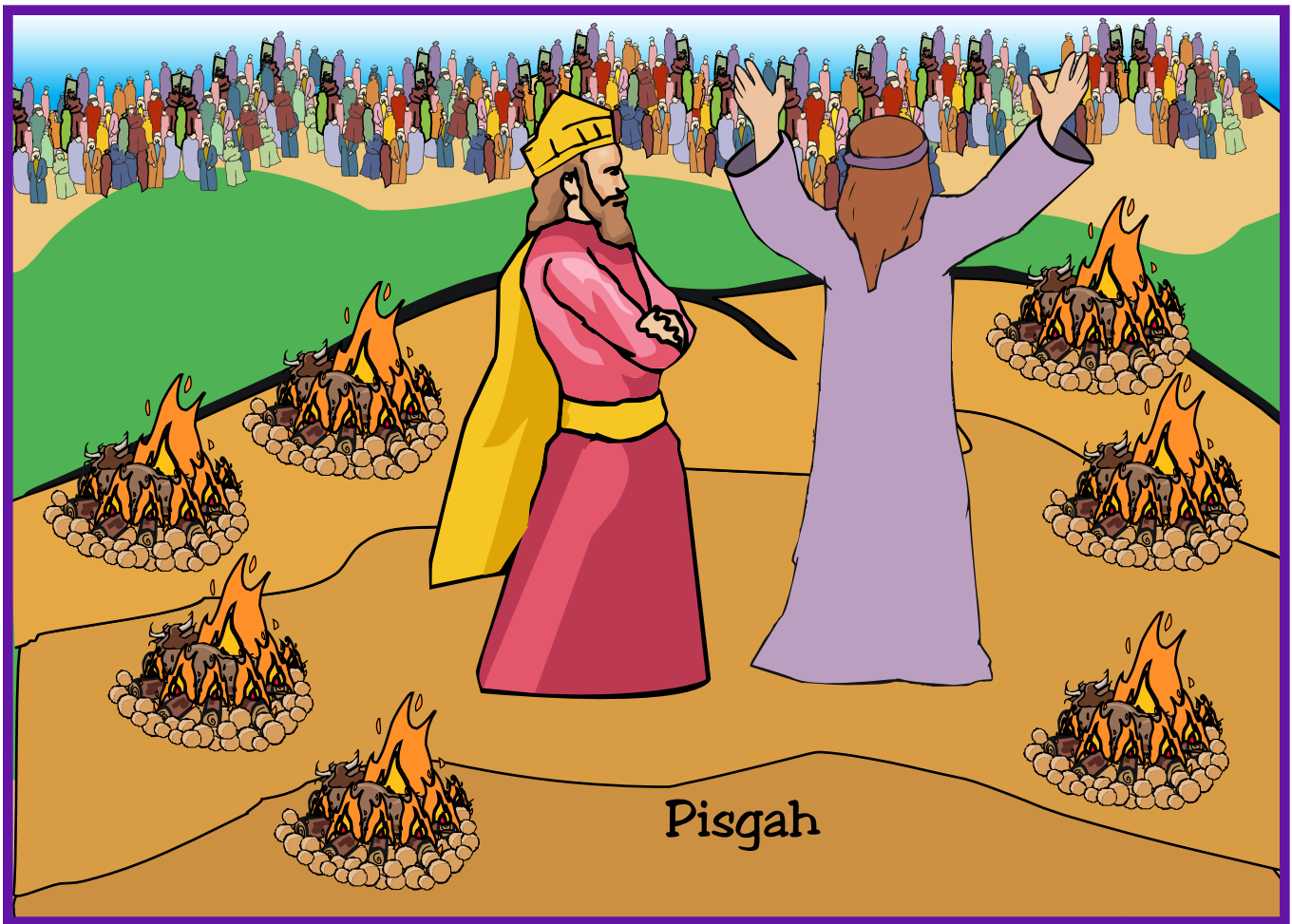
Balaam had a good donkey who was just trying to tell him something. Balaam fell flat on the ground. He was so ashamed. He was supposed to be a prophet, but he couldn’t even see or hear God’s angel. His donkey was smarter than he was. He should have been listening for God’s direction, but he was thinking only about himself. Finally his spiritual eyes and ears were opened again to God’s word. He said to the angel, “Send me back home, if you want.”

The angel said, “No, keep going, but remember, say only what I tell you to say.” He won’t forget this time.



Balak and Balaam moved in closer to the Israelite camp. They climbed a low hill where they could see part of the camp.

Of course our mountain view is the best view. We imagine 7 altars lit by 7 fires offering up 7 bulls and 7 rams. These sacrifices prepared by King Balak were supposed to please God so He would answer Balaam's prayers.



Balaam, the wise man, listened for the word of God, then shouted his 7 predictions. Were they blessings or cursings? They were blessings. Balak was angry. He wanted cursings. The men visited 3 different hills, with 7 sacrifices each time. Balak was hopeful, but still no curses. For Balaam could only say what the Lord put into his mouth. (The Lord put words in the mouth of his donkey too.) Balak got angrier and angrier. “If you’re not going to curse them, please don’t bless them,” he said. But Balaam couldn’t help it.

Of course, the king refused to pay Balaam, the wise man, and sent him home.



Winding down Mount Nebo we see a few small towns and more mountains. We take a detour to a mountain by the Dead Sea. As we get closer we see pillars sticking up on the very top. They are the remains of a beautiful palace built by Herod the Great. He called it Machaerus. He liked to have hard-to-reach palaces around the country in case of enemy attack. He stored enough food in this palace to feed himself and his family for 5 years.

We'll park here, open our Bibles, and read the story. (Matthew 14:1-9; Mark 6:11-19)



Herod the Great had sons named Herod too. They were all rulers in this land in New Testament times. Most of the Herods were mean and didn't obey the 10 Commandments. But there was one man who was not afraid of them. His name was John the Baptist. He spoke out against evil whenever he saw it.

One of the Herods, Herod Antipas, who even though he was married, stole the wife of a half brother, Herod Philip, and married her. John the Baptist spoke up and accused him of breaking the 7th Commandment - Thou shalt not commit adultery. (Exodus 20:14) They arrested him, put him in Machaerus and kept him there for a year and a half. It did not end well. John was finally killed there. We didn't go up to the top, but they say you can still see the dungeon and the iron hooks in the wall.



Our guide asked, “Which female Bible character lived here in Moab and had a book named after her?” We shout out, “Ruth!” Right, of course. Naomi, who had moved here from Bethlehem was her mother-in-law. When all the men in Naomi’s family died, she planned to move back to Bethlehem when the rains began. She tried to persuade her daughters-in-law to stay here in Moab with their own mothers. Orpah stayed, but the other one, Ruth, loved Naomi and her God so much that she left Moab to take care of her. After moving to Bethlehem she was still called “Ruth the Moabite!” Sadly, those words reminded everyone that she was a foreigner and not welcome in that land. (Ruth 1:1-18)



Just now our driver is stopping the bus. Why? We get out and there, growing wild beside the highway are these beautiful black irises. It's the Jordanian national flower and it blooms only two weeks out of the year. We move close for pictures, careful not to step on them.

Back to the bus. We have a very special stop coming up.



Our guide promised us this morning that we were going to visit the Arnon River which is about midpoint down the Dead Sea and is the southern border of Moab. Here we are, but we aren't prepared for it. "Cover your eyes," he says, as we drive up to the look-out point. He loves to surprise us. "Okay, uncover your eyes now." We all uncover our eyes at the same time. We catch our breath at the sight of it. It's hard to find words. Magnificent! Awesome! Jordan calls it their miniature Grand Canyon, Wadi Mujib. It's 2 ½ miles wide and 1,650 ft deep. The river is so far down into the canyon, that it's invisible until it sparkles in the sunlight. Our cameras are too small to squeeze it all in at once.

Imagine the looks on the faces of the Israelites when they came upon it for the first time. They didn't have a bus to get them across. From up here at the edge they must have looked like little ants walking down the canyon.



We buy fossils here. They say they're 6 million years old, older than the Bible. Little sea shells imbedded in the rock help to tell their stories. We tuck them into our backpacks. Our classmates at home will not believe it. Our teachers will not believe it. You mean this desert was once under water? Wow!





Now that we're past the Arnon River, we drive in the desert for miles and miles. We see Bedouins caring for their flocks. Bedouins don't stay in one place, but move around, living in tents, just like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. In our bus, whoever first sees a flock calls out, "Goats to the left" or "Sheep to the right!" We wonder what the animals find to eat in this rocky, sandy, empty land.





Near the end of the day, we arrive at Shawbak, a Crusader Castle. It was built almost 900 years ago. It's way up on a steep, rocky hill. The bus is driving so close to the edge, that we turn away from our windows! Castles are always up high so they can keep watch over travelers approaching. The castle used to control the caravan route between Arabia and Syria.

The guide tells us to be careful. There are no guard rails. "It's a long way down," he warns. We run into the castle. We're on our own. There's no one else here. What fun to race through these dark, echoing passageways. One room was once a kitchen, one a chapel. We peek out the slits cut in the rock walls. Soldiers used them to shoot arrows at enemies hundreds of years ago.

The sun's gone down. We're sad. It's been a great day, but it's time to go. We'll curl up against our pillows on the bus as we head down into the dark desert.

