

Abraham would have felt at home

• TEXT & PHOTOS By TOM MEYER

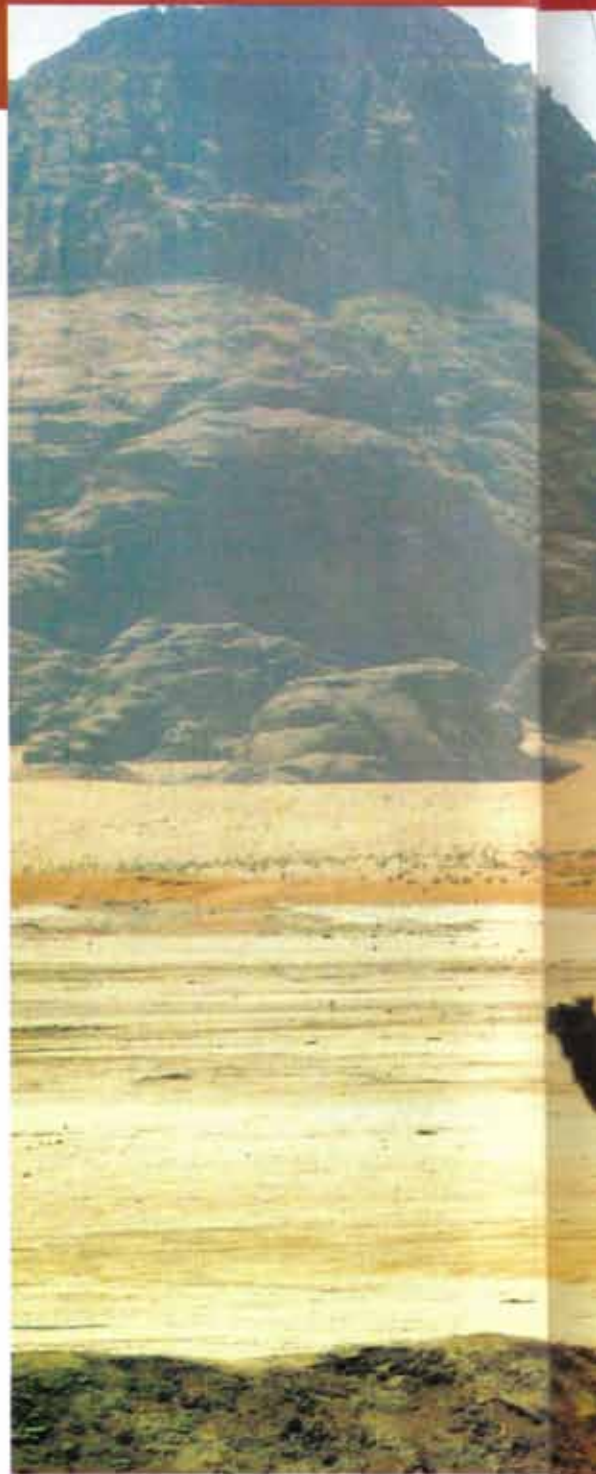
Let me tell you about actually stepping into the shoes of Abraham at the Beduin encampment at Wadi Rum with Jerusalem University College.

Led by Dr. Paul Wright, we left Jerusalem before the sun rose. Our group made its way past the upper



MAKING ARABIC COFFEE is an art. Here, our host carefully grinds the beans with a mortar and pestle.

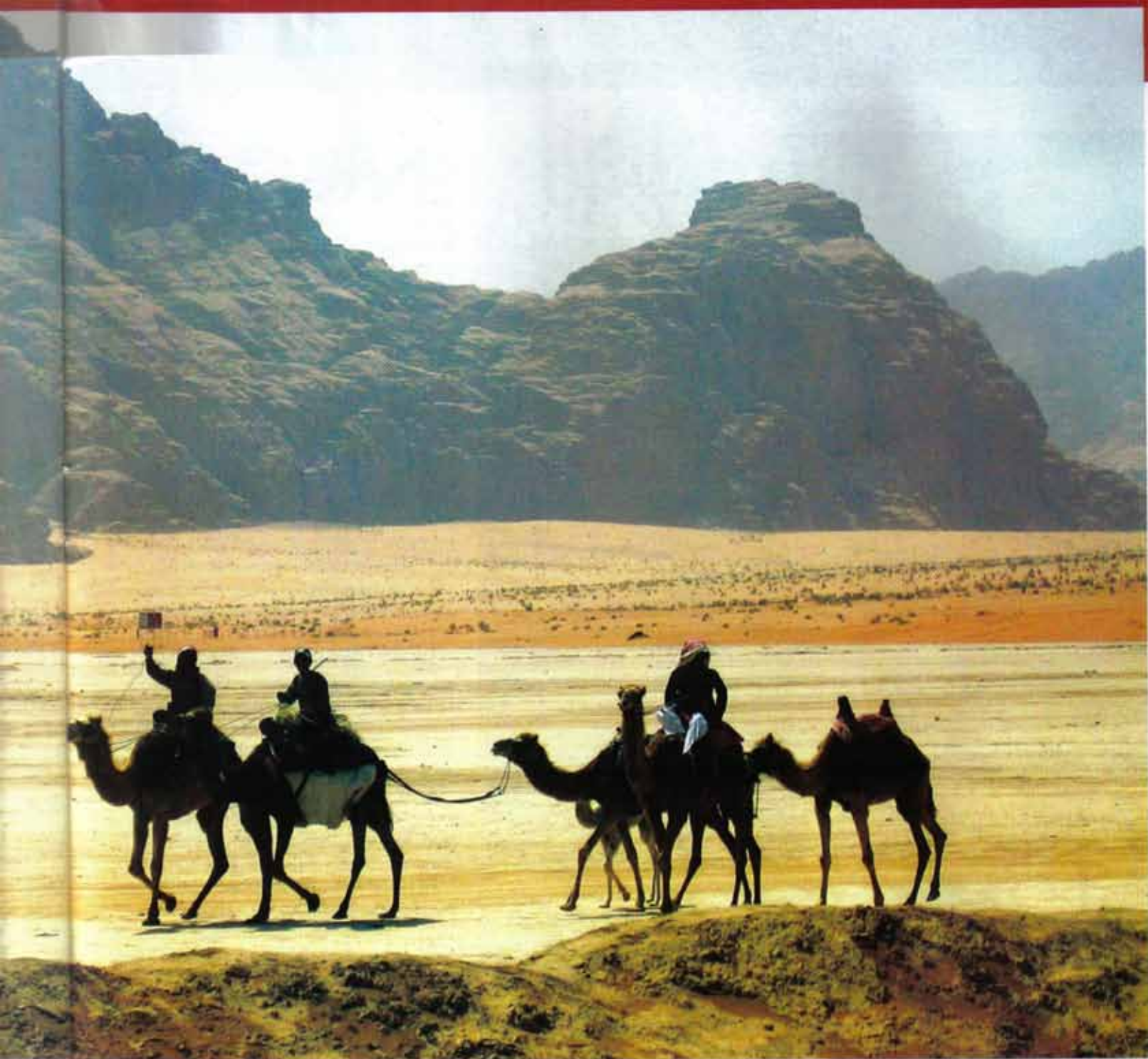
finger of Wadi Kelt (between Jerusalem and Jericho), and to the Ascent of Adummim, the road ending near the Dead Sea. From there we headed south along the Rift Valley highway, and crossed the border into Aqaba. We took the Aqaba Highway toward Wadi Rum in Jordan and arrived at the camp some five miles into the desert. It was very hot and dry, around 90 degrees. When we arrived, the Beduin men were wearing the traditional *mendeel* – a tasseled red and white cloth twisted on their head with a *mirreer* (a double ring like a thick black rope on top). Our hosts, were sitting in the door of their tent in the heat of the day, just as Abraham was in Genesis 18. The Beduin, like Abraham, are known for accommodating strangers. The tents' structure and fabric were probably very similar to those in the time of Abraham. The sunlight bounced off the black tent, which was in a niche of the sandstone hills. The tent was divided into two 'rooms.' The first was a "public" open area approximately 50 feet by 17 feet. This first chamber is called a *shig* and appeared to be bare of everything except mattresses and pillows. The second room, in which the women lived, was off limits to visitors. The two areas were divided by a woven black hair rug that hung like a wall from the back of the tent right out



CAMELS still find wide use in the desert, where some things remain unchanged for thousands of years.

to the end of the ropes at the front. The second room measured approximately 15 feet by 17 feet wide and appeared to be used as a closet as well as the sleeping quarters for both of the Beduin families.

Just as Abraham saw visitors approaching and ran to meet them, so our hosts rose and greeted us. And as Abraham addressed the leader of the



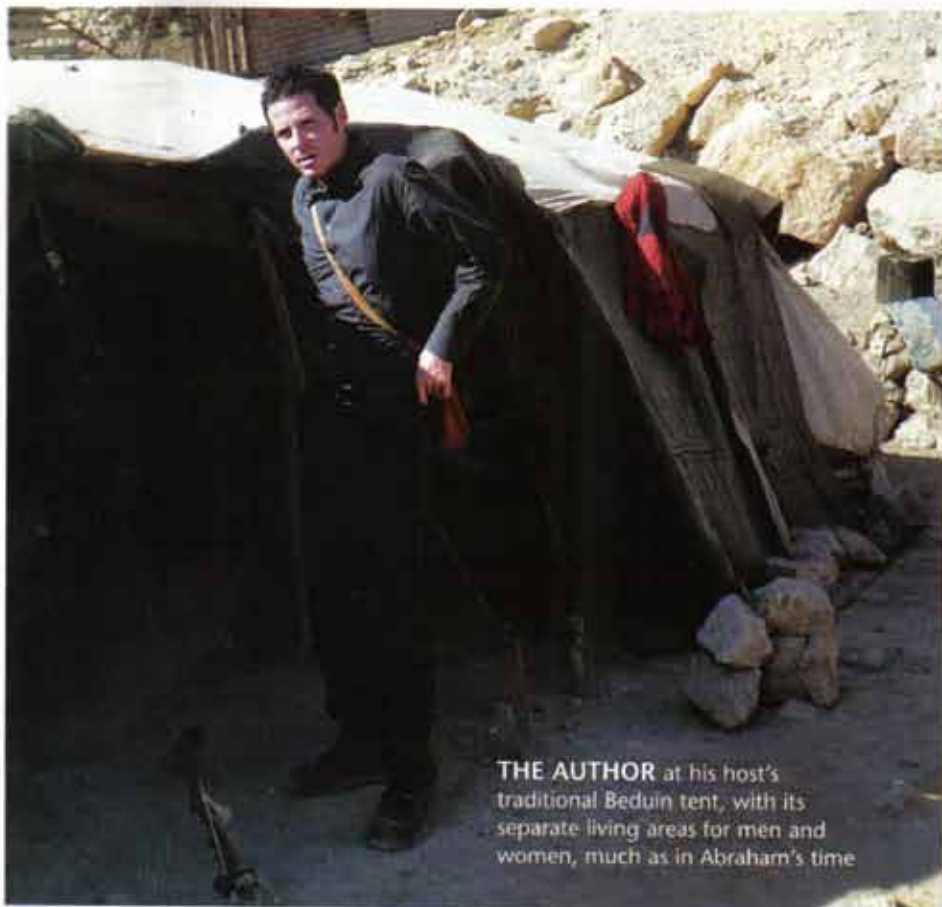
group of three in Genesis 18, so did the Beduin chief greet our leader Dr. Wright.

Tea was then fetched for us and we were encouraged to rest under the shade on a cloth mat called a *jannabiya*. We and the visitors from Genesis chapter 18 both drank our beverage for free and were encouraged to recline until the meal was served. The beverages were served by men, and only with their right hand. The women did not make or serve the tea because it was apparently the man's job, as Abraham

did to his visitors. I thought of how Abraham told Sarah to make bread for their guests as our host hastened into the tent and told the women that they could now begin to measure the flour and knead it in order to make the *shraak*, or flat bread upon the *saj*, a dome-side-up bowl placed over the fire. The fire has to be made with special attention because there are many poisonous branches in the wilderness.

In both the biblical account and in our field study the women's responsibility

did not extend to the preparation of the animal. The animal offered in Genesis 18 and to us was tender and good, certainly a firstling of the flock. I was amazed at the time and energy put into preparing just one sheep. From the time the knife cut the sheep's throat until it was ready for us to eat was at least three hours. When served with rice, the sheep comfortably fed 30 people. *Mensef* is the traditional Beduin feast made from goats or sheep. The meat is served on a portion of *shraak* bread with steamed rice and sheep's yoghurt



THE AUTHOR at his host's traditional Bedouin tent, with its separate living areas for men and women, much as in Abraham's time



MOLLY TENUE turns goat milk into a kind of yogurt. The skin of a slaughtered sheep is saved, dried out and eventually sewed together. It is then used to 'beat' the milk back and forth until it is churned into yogurt.

or laban. I learned that flesh is rarely eaten among the Beduin due to its worth. The course we enjoyed is only prepared for occasions such as weddings and special guests, on the average about four times a year. Just as in Genesis 18, a splendid banquet was prepared for us as well. Our host served us as Abraham served his guests – standing while we ate, as did Abraham, to make sure every need was met. I also noticed that just as Sarah was out of sight in the tent, so the older women and those who were of marriageable age were hidden in the private tent chamber. Both Sarah and the Beduin women knew the protocol their society required, at the same time having both ears and eyes open. My eye caught some of the women staring at us, and it appeared as if they were gossiping and giggling about their guests.

The hosts did not eat anything until we were totally finished, with the Beduin women eating only our leftovers; they sat on the earth and ate with their hands, making little scooping motions.

After dinner there was a time of story telling, music and dancing. Beduin dance only at night. The dancing is called *samer*. About seven men stood there at first, in a row in front of the tent, shoulder to shoulder, swaying slightly side to side and rocking while singing in Arabic. By the time the festivities were over, it was fully dark, and looking up I was better able to comprehend the magnitude of the promise God made to Abraham by comparing the number of his offspring to the number of stars in the sky. The geographical isolation and conservatism of the Beduin in Wadi Rum enabled us to glimpse the lifestyle of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. I was able to detect the many 'nomadic' customs that have survived millennia. It has been 3,500 years since Abraham, yet the present culture of the tent dwellers would have been familiar to the biblical patriarch.

Some things don't change.