

WALKING THE HOLY LAND

Archaeology, Sacred Places & Surprising Human Stories

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WHAT THIS LECTURE EXPLORES

History, archaeology & geology

How the land itself shaped routes, settlement and history.

Sacred places

Why this small land carries meaning for Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

How we know

Biblical texts, extra-biblical sources, archaeology, dating and material clues.

Human stories

Prophets, saints, rulers, travelers, songs — and one very easy recipe.

1. The land beneath the story

Geology, crossroads and the deep human timeline

Geology that shaped history

Israel lies along the African–Arabian tectonic plate boundary and the Dead Sea Transform Fault. The plates slide against each other about 0.25 inch per year. Timna (South Israel) and Wadi Faynan (West Jordan) copper areas are now about 62 miles apart; around 20 million years ago they were together.

Holy Land Geological wonders created by tectonic movements

The **Dead Sea** is about 430 m / 1,411 ft below sea level and roughly 34% salt. Its basin formed about 2–3 million years ago.

Israel's **makhteshim** are geological formations with a different origin from river-cut canyons such as the Grand Canyon. The word Makhtesh was added to English dictionary recently. Israel has 3 big: Mahtesh Ramon, Large Mahtesh & Small Mahtesh and 2 tiny: Mahteshei Arif.

A strategic crossroads

Africa–Asia–Europe pathways and the Mediterranean made this land a corridor repeatedly used by armies, traders and empires.

Three written echoes left by conquerors across the centuries

Merneptah's stele in Egypt (1210 BCE) "Israel is laid waste – its seed is no more"

Sennacherib's Assyrian record (around 700 BCE) "Hezekya is shut as a bird in a cage in Jerusalem"

the Jaffa story of Thutmose III and soldiers hiding in baskets (15th century BCE).

SCIENTIFIC DISCOVERIES & ANCIENT HUMAN PRESENCE

WHERE	WHEN	WHAT
Ubeidiya, near the Sea of Galilee	1.5 million years ago	Human presence
Carmel Caves	500,000 years ago and 10,000 years ago	Human presence; UNESCO site
Atlit Yam	8–9,000 years ago	Submerged village and cultic site
Nahal Ein Gev II	12,000 years ago	Woman-and-geese figurine
Lake Ram / Golan	250,000 years ago	"Venus of Ram"

2. Prophets, saints & names that traveled

Stories from the lecture that connect local places to world culture

The land of prophets

Jonah is linked by tradition with Jaffa. King David's story touches Bethlehem, the Elah Valley, Hebron, Jerusalem and Ein Gedi. In Christian tradition, Jesus gives Peter the keys at Banyas, near Hermon.

St. George & St. Andrew

St. George is associated with Lod and later Crusader tradition. St. Andrew, brother of Peter and a fisherman from the Sea of Galilee, evangelized in Greece and Asia Minor; the Scottish flag preserves his X-shaped cross.

Ascalon / Ashkelon

Southern Israel city that became a symbol of steadfastness. It took Crusaders 50 years to capture this city. They build strongholds all around to protect themselves and prepare the siege.

The name travels surprisingly far: St. George's legendary sword was named Ascalon, Churchill's wartime airplane was named Ascalon, and same root is in the words shallot and scallion that were sold in Ashkelon markets.

Pilgrims' Road to the Second Temple

A newly excavated 2,000-year-old stepped street in Jerusalem led pilgrims toward the Second Temple. Pilgrims came for Passover, Shavuot and Sukkot, using ritual baths (mikva'ot) before ascending. A drainage channel beneath the street preserved pottery and coins from the Roman revolt.

Things you may not know about Jesus

Jesus was Jewish, born into a Jewish family, in Beth Lehem. Like King David. Joseph is believed to come from King David's dynasty. The Holy family travelled from Nazareth to Beth Lehem for a Roman census. Jesus visited the Temple in Jerusalem many times throughout his childhood and adulthood. He also spent much of his ministry around the Sea of Galilee.

Objects from the time of Jesus discovered near the Sea of Galilee

A 2,000-year-old boat was discovered in 1986 at the Sea of Galilee and is displayed at the Yigal Alon Museum. At Magdala, a 2,000-year-old synagogue and its carved menorah stone connect visitors with the world of Jesus' lifetime.

Cleopatra at Ein Gedi

The balsam groves of Ein Gedi produced resin for perfume, medicine and incense. Josephus describes Mark Antony giving control of these groves to Cleopatra. Centuries later, a Ein Gedi synagogue mosaic warned against revealing the village secret. This secret is believed to be details of balsam shrub growth.

3. Sacred geography, identity & historical evidence

Holy to three monotheistic religions

Roughly 5 billion people — about 60% of humanity — belong to Judaism, Christianity or Islam, all of which attach profound religious meaning to this land and especially Jerusalem.

	 JUDAISM	 CHRISTIANITY	 ISLAM
			
WHY THIS LAND IS HOLY	The biblical homeland of the Jewish people. Site of the First and Second Temples in Jerusalem.	The land where Jesus was born, lived, preached, was crucified and, according to Christian belief, rose from the dead.	Jerusalem is associated with the Prophet Muhammad's Night Journey and Ascension. Al-Aqsa Mosque is a major holy site.
KEY PLACES	Temple Mount (holiest site); Western Wall (most important accessible prayer site).	Church of the Holy Sepulchre and other sites of Jesus' life in Jerusalem and throughout the Holy Land.	Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock (on the Haram al-Sharif). Al-Aqsa is Islam's third holiest site, after Mecca and Medina.
SINCE WHEN	Biblical connection — about 4,000 years ago (Abraham).	About 2,000 years ago (1st century CE).	About 1,400 years ago (7th century CE).
WORLDWIDE POPULATION (2026 est.)	~16 million	~2.7 billion	~2.1 billion

Why the name Israel?

In Genesis, Jacob receives the name Israel after wrestling with a mysterious being. His twelve sons become the twelve tribes: the “Children of Israel.” The name later belonged to an Iron Age kingdom and was selected again in 1948.

A COMPACT TIMELINE

~4,000 years ago	Biblical Jacob / Israel
Iron Age	Kingdoms of Israel and Judea
135 CE	Roman renaming to Syria Palestina; Jerusalem renamed Aelia Capitolina
May 1948	Provisional leadership debates the name; the new state adopts Israel

4. Archaeology clues

HOW DO WE KNOW WHAT HAPPENED HERE?

Three circles of knowledge

- (1) The Bible: Old and New Testaments;
- (2) Extra-biblical sources such as Josephus, the Amarna Letters, Egyptian pharaohs, pilgrim accounts and Assyrian records;
- (3) Archaeology.

When the circles overlap: “BINGO!”

ARCHEOLOGICAL TRICKS

Carbon Dating

Carbon-14 forms in the atmosphere and is absorbed by living organisms. After death it decays. By measuring the amount of Carbon-14 in any organic material such as human or animal bones, olive pits, weeds, grain archeologists know how long ago it died. Can measure material up to about 50,000 years old, with precision varying from tens to about a hundred years.

Coins, materials & names

Coins are “like candies for archaeologists”: you get a face of a ruler, a date, a language, a material and can date the whole horizontal layer around the coin to the same time. Materials and techniques in pottery, water cistern sealant, cloth help date a layer as well. Place-names can also travel or change: examples include Rama / Aram and Hammat / Emmaus.

Jewish or non-Jewish archaeology?

Clues include mikva’ot, absence of pig and catfish bones, stone vessels associated with purity, Torah scrolls, menorah imagery, and the presence or absence of local cultic places. The menorah is a Jewish symbol documented archaeologically for more than 2,000 years; the Star of David became a prominent Jewish emblem much later.

Saul, David & Solomon — were they real?

The lecture raises the archaeological question without giving away the answer: how do texts, inscriptions and excavations overlap when we investigate the early Israelite monarchy? This is a story for Part 2.

Maps tell stories of places, geography and importance

The Madaba Map: A 6th-century Byzantine mosaic map, found in Madaba, Jordan in 1884. About 50 × 20 feet. It depicts Christian sites and preserves valuable clues about the appearance and layout of Jerusalem.

5. A song that changed with history

JERUSALEM OF GOLD

May 1967: Jerusalem is divided. An Israeli in West Jerusalem can see the Old City walls but cannot walk to the Western Wall. Mayor Teddy Kollek asks Naomi Shemer to write a song for a Jerusalem Independence Day festival.

The first performance: A 20-year-old soldier-teacher, Shuli Natan, sings the song. It becomes an overnight sensation.

Three weeks later: The Six-Day War begins. When paratroopers reach the Western Wall, they sing the song. Naomi Shemer adds a final verse, changing the emotional arc from longing to victory.

Why “Jerusalem of Gold”?: The title is much older than the State of Israel. In the Talmudic story of Rabbi Akiva and Rachel (Babylonian Talmud, Nedarim 50a), the couple are so poor that they sleep on straw. Akiva removes straw from Rachel’s hair and promises that, if he ever has the means, he will place a “Jerusalem of Gold” on her head — apparently a golden head ornament depicting Jerusalem.

6. Take a little Israel home



Yael's Carrot Salad

- 5 large carrots, roughly grated
- Dried cranberries
- Sugared pecans

Sauce:

- 2 tbsp vegetable or olive oil
- 1 tbsp regular vinegar
- A little salt and pepper
- 2 squeezed garlic cloves — otherwise it turns out bland

Naturally sweet • about 5 minutes start to finish • loved by all

LISTEN AGAIN

Opening: “Eretz, Eretz” — Ilanit, with English lyrics

[Watch on YouTube](#)

Closing: “Jerusalem of Gold” — Ofra Haza, with English lyrics

[Watch on YouTube](#)

BOOKS MENTIONED

“Grand Hotel Europa” by Ilja Leonard Pfeijffer

“The birth of Isreal” by Jorge Garcia-Grandos

“For Jerusalem. A Life by Teddy Kollek” Teddy & Amos Kollek

Want another lecture or to walk these stories in Israel?

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