

Fourteen Books that Reveal the Land of Israel

by [Geoffrey Clarfield](#) (November 2024)



Introduction

There are fourteen books, among others, that I have read and reread which reveal the land and people of Israel in a way that makes sense to my adult self. And so I have designed a virtual tour to give them context. Most of you will make this tour as “armchair travelers,” but for those who want to do the real tour, do not hesitate to call me. I can help you set it up!

There is a near infinite number of itineraries for the land of Israel. The reason for this is that for more than two thousand years, Jews, Christians, Muslims, including various adventurers have been visiting the land of Israel to see for themselves what it is that makes the place so special.

Most visitors come to Israel for religious reasons, as devout Jews making their pilgrimage, as Christians walking in the footsteps of Jesus or, as Muslims visiting a version of Jerusalem which was selectively developed over time in Islamic theology. For those of us of a secular bent, we visit Israel to experience the physical environment and the archaeological monuments which give context to the Bible and ancient history, and which has influenced Western literature, music, drama, and film.

Many of us also visit to experience the marvel of a reconstituted independent Jewish state after the Holocaust. However, there is another reason to visit Israel, something that is unique to this trip; and that is, in addition to all this, to better understand the biblically inspired origins of our own English-speaking democracies.

Until quite recently, it was thought that modern representative democracy, that form of government which emerged in Holland, Great Britain and the Americas during the last 400 years was caused by a gradual secularization of society. The argument here is that as people turned their backs on religion and the Bible, they developed a new way of governing themselves, inspired by ancient Greek models, especially that of ancient Athens during the Fifth Century BC.

Recent scholarship suggests that modern representative democracy emerged because of a re-examination of the political structure of ancient Israel by key European thinkers. They saw ancient Israel as a society ruled by law, where there were checks and balances among the various parts of society and where even kings were not above the law.

Until then, Europe had been ruled by kings who believed in divine right and that they were somehow above the law. As this re-exploration of what Christians call the Old Testament gained ground among intellectuals, it was and remains more than the equal of the ancient Greek model when we contemplate our own modern democratic origins.

This short, intensive, and enjoyable itinerary distills the essence of Israel, ancient and modern to the interested reader and traveler. It connects the experience of ancient and modern Israel to our own destiny as citizens of English-speaking democracies, for if we allow Israel to be attacked, it is an attack on the Biblical origin of our own political freedoms that we cannot afford to live without.

For further reading about the Biblical origins of modern democracy see [*Political Hebraism: Judaic Sources in Early Modern Political Thought*](#).

Part One-In The Desert

1) Arrival in Morning



Blessed are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion. Psalm 84:5

We will leave Toronto International Airport in the evening and arrive early the next morning in Tel Aviv, on the edge of the continent of Asia. Tel Aviv means “mound of spring.” Jewish

Zionists after World War I built it, on the outskirts of the ancient port of Jaffa. It is Israel's second largest and second most populous, and by far its most dynamic city.

Like New York, Tel-Aviv advertises itself as the city that never stops. It is a coastal city that drapes itself up and down the Mediterranean Sea. It provides an arresting contrast between the skyscrapers of this high-tech and cultural capital and the shoreline that has changed little during the last three thousand years.

2) Day One-Southbound



And Abram journeyed on, still going toward the Negev.

Then we will get on a bus and leave Tel Aviv before the early morning traffic. We will be heading southeast towards the Negev desert. The Negev desert was the destination of our spiritual ancestor Abraham after his lengthy sojourn which began in southern Iraq. From there he journeyed north into the Harran of what is now Syria and then south through Lebanon, the Galilee, Samaria, and Judea and then finally, to the

plains, hills, and mountains of this wilderness.

As we drive southeast, we leave the coastal plain and slowly enter the flat desert plains of the Negev on the way south. An hour and a half into our journey we stop to eat our hotel packed brunch. Soon we will arrive at Ein Avdat National Park. Ein means spring in Hebrew and Avdat is the name of an ancient Nabatean King, whose, according to tradition, undiscovered tomb lies somewhere in the area.

The park is characterized by steep canyons, springs, and salt tolerant plants like poplar trees. By the 19th century it was an abandoned and lawless area fought over by Bedouin tribes. Today the Negev has been reborn through Israeli patented high-tech irrigation techniques that allow for agriculture, animal husbandry and the development of cities such as those of Beer Sheva. That city is home to Ben-Gurion University and its Institute for Desert Studies.

We will hike through this park and then continue by bus to the town of Mitzpe Ramon, perched on the edge of the great Ramon Crater from where we can see the mountains of Moab in neighboring Jordan across the Rift Valley. There we will have lunch and spend the afternoon exploring the crater, by foot, by bicycle, by jeep or with camels.

After dinner we will explore "Abraham and his Legacy," based on the book by David Rosenberg. Rosenberg eloquently argues that the massive cultural, literary, and ritual parallels between the Bible and the civilizations of the ancient Near East, exist partly because of the simple fact that Abraham was a literate and upper-class son of the cultures that we now call Sumerian and Akkadian and was cuneiform literate.

For further reading see [Abraham: The First Historical Biography](#).

3) Day Two- Masada, Ein Gedi, and the Shores of the Dead Sea



After Saul returned from pursuing the Philistines, he was told, "David is in the Desert of En Gedi." 1 Samuel 24:

Our group will have the choice of spending the early morning hours walking in the town of Mitzpe Ramon or, even going down to the crater for further biking, hiking, or walking. We will have an early lunch and from there, drive to Masada and take the cable car to the top where we will explore what was once a Herodian palace, a luxury desert spa for the Land of Israel's rulers under the Romans Herodian dynasty. We will contemplate the fact that Masada was the last holdout of the Jewish rebels who still fought against Rome, a few years after the Jewish Revolt of 66-70 AD.

After contemplating the tragic history of Masada we will take a short drive to explore the upbeat oasis of Ein Gedi. Ein Gedi is mentioned in the Book of Joshua. In the Book of 1

Samuel we read about how King David hid in the desert around Ein Gedi. We read about the vineyards of Ein Gedi in the Song of Songs. During the Roman period, Ein Gedi provided the Greco-Roman world with balsam which Israeli scientists have recently revived from ancient seeds. The nearby kibbutz hosts an ancient mosaic from an ancient synagogue floor. There is hiking, walking, and swimming at David's (water) Falls for those so inclined.

We will then drive to Kibbutz Kalia on the shores of the Dead Sea where we will spend the night. The evening lecture will address the paradoxical life of Flavius Josephus, a high priest of the Second Temple, who initially fought against the Romans, then surrendered to them and became the near sole chronicler of the Jewish Wars. The story of Josephus is also a story of the tension between Hellenic culture and that of the Jewish tradition.

For further reading see [*A Jew Among Romans: The Life and Legacy of Flavius Josephus.*](#)



Part Two-Jerusalem and Judea

1) From the Desert to the City.



“For the instructor, the rule of the war, the first attack of the sons of light shall be undertaken against

the forces of the sons of darkness..." From the Dead Sea Scrolls, The War Scroll

The following day we can swim in the pool or enjoy the beach where one can "walk" or at least "sit" or float on the saline waters of the Dead Sea unassisted. We will then visit the archaeological site of Qumran where the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in 1948, the year of the birth of the modern State of Israel.

Until the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the most ancient versions of the Old Testament followed the Aleppo Codex which was written in the eighth century A.D. The Dead Sea Scrolls completely transformed the study of the text of the Old Testament. Those Dead Sea Scrolls which are fragments of the Old Testament usually agree with the Masoretic text of the Aleppo Codex and its variant forms. We will see them on display in the Shrine of the Book when we visit the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.

But there also sectarian writings which scholars have argued over and clearly reflect some sort of specific sect which was different than that of the Pharisees and Sadducees of Roman ruled Judea. There is even a scroll that describes buried treasure that is supposed to be hidden somewhere in the nearby desert. This is the famous Copper Scroll.

Now that most of the scrolls have been translated, we can marvel at the fact that they contain unknown stories about Noah, Enoch and Abraham and most remarkably include an explanation of why God chose Abraham's son for sacrifice. There are also prophecies from Ezekiel, Jeremiah and Daniel not found in the Aleppo Codex.

Not only do the Dead Sea Scrolls give us a deeper understanding of the kaleidoscope like varieties of Jewish thought and practice in Roman Judea, but they also provide us

with key themes and patterns that gave rise to or were later adopted by the early Christians.

After lunch we will drive to Jerusalem, travelling from the lowest point on earth to a city which is as old as the Canaanites and which King David made his capital. After checking into our hotel and lunch we will explore the Israel Museum, Shrine of the Book, and the nearby Bible Lands Museum of Jerusalem. We will drive by the menorah beside the Knesset, the Israeli parliament, Montefiore's windmill, the YMCA tower, the King David Hotel, and other famous sites. We will finish the afternoon at the Menahem Begin center. We will have dinner at a local restaurant known for its "mezze" a mix of multiple Mediterranean salads that can accompany a meal of fish or meat. . For those who want to go out on the town at night we will check what is "on."

The evening lecture will focus on the influence of the Old Testament in Western literature, music, and art, for this is indeed the common expressive root of Judeo-Christian culture and permeates even the most contemporary novels, films, and TV episodes found in all English-speaking democracies.



2) Day Four-The Old City



“If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget how to play the harp.”

Until the mid-19th century, when people thought of the real city of Jerusalem, they thought of a small city in a backwater of the Ottoman Empire, which by the mid-1800s, had a Jewish majority. But in the minds of all the Jews, Christians and Muslims who lived there, there was another Jerusalem, a glorious city of the past.

For the Jews, it is the City of David from which emerged the Psalms, the greatest poetry of the Hebrew Bible and inspiration for so much of what is great in the English poetic lyric tradition, which culminates in the work of lyricists such as Bob Dylan. For Christians it is the place where Jesus preached and died. For Muslims it is the place where some of the earliest mosques and Islamic traditions were established after the Muslim conquest in the seventh century AD when the conquering Arabian elite finally recognized that they were

neither Jewish nor Christian but something yet to be defined. Until the recent spate of Temple denial, Muslims have always believed that their Dome of the Rock was built on the site of the Jewish Temple of Solomon.

Only when the heavy hand of the Ottoman Empire was upon the land during the late 19th century did the pressure of the imperial powers such as Russia, France, and Britain, begin to improve the status of the persecuted Jews of Ottoman Jerusalem who went out of the Old city and spilled West into what is now called the “new city” and which is home to many Jews from all over the Western and Islamic world who returned to the land of Israel both before and during the rise of secular Zionism.

The Old City of Jerusalem is home to the Western Wall, that part of the Third Temple which is still standing. It is home to the Jewish Quarter, which was rebuilt after 1967, after having been vandalized by the Jordanian army (The Arab Legion led by British officers) after they violently occupied and annexed it against international law following Israel’s War of Independence in 1948. The city also has its Muslim Quarter, its Christian Quarter, and its Armenian Quarter.

Since the unification of the city, connecting the western and eastern sections, by the government of Israel in 1967, excavations continue to show the deep roots of the Jewish people in Jerusalem. We will visit all the major sites in the Old City, including some of the underground tunnels that date back to the time of King Herod, just before the Jewish Revolt of 70 A.D.

For further reading see [*The Gifts of the Jews: How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels*](#) and [*Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World*](#) (For those who want to seriously read this impossibly expensive book I can provide a PDF version).

3) Day Five- In the Biblical Heartland of Judea



Lo, we heard of it as being in Ephrath; we found it in the field of the wood.

It is impossible to read the Bible without conjuring up the landscapes and cities of Judea and Samaria, the biblical heartland of the Land of Israel. According to international law, in the early 1920s the League of Nations acknowledged through a vote that the land west of the Jordan had always belonged to the Jewish People and that they had the right to return to it. In 1948 Jordan occupied this area and in 1967 Israel reclaimed it

The town of Efrat recalls the Matriarch Rachel's final resting place (Genesis 35:19), and her tomb is located a few miles to the north. It is situated on the way to the Etzion Bloc on the road from Jerusalem to Hebron.

Parts of the Etzion Bloc was purchased by Jews twenty years before the State of Israel was established in 1948 after the the League of Nations (British administered) Mandate. Four

kibbutzim were founded, three religious-Zionist and one secular. When Arab militias and the Jordanian Arab Legion mounted their military campaigns against Palestinian Jewish communities in this region in 1947 and 1948, the Haganah dispatched soldiers to hold the Etzion Bloc, a key position on the southern approaches to Jerusalem.

Five months of siege and attacks against the Jews of Gush Etzion ended with the massacre of 250 Jewish defenders on May 13, 1948. The Jewish communities there temporarily were erased. The next day, the State of Israel was declared.

In the months following Israel's liberation of Judea in June 1967, the children of Gush Etzion's defenders returned. As of 1968 there were few buildings still standing from the original Jewish communities. One giant, ancient oak tree has remained – the “Lone Oak.” It stands next to the modern Har Etzion Yeshiva complex, a religious-Zionist institution in the heart of the community of Alon Shvut (“Return to the Oak”). The yeshiva there trains more than 450 students annually. It boasts hundreds of overseas alumni, mostly from the United States. Many of them, after having spent one or two years at the yeshiva as students, return to their home communities and some have moved back to Israel.

We will tour Efrat and the surrounding area in the company of Efrat resident Ardie Goldman. Ardie grew up in the United States and moved to Israel in the early 1980s. He spends much of his time meeting with visitors, including many college students, from the United States.

These students come from secular and Christian colleges that have embraced the Palestinian cause and that have turned the time-honored Christian pilgrimage to the Holy Land as an exercise in political replacement theology. Many claim that the Palestinian Arabs are the indigenous people of the Land of Israel and that the Jews are white, European colonial settlers acting in the interest of their vague Euro-American sponsors.

(Most Israelis come from Islamic middle eastern countries who expelled them or made life impossible there for Jews)

Anti Zionist political tourism is a growing phenomenon that the Jewish People and friends of of Israel ignore at their peril. In a few short years these impressionable students will begin to vote in elections which will negatively effect Israel-North American relations.

For further reading see [*Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East: 1776 to the Present*](#) and [*The Jewish People's Rights to the Land of Israel*](#).

Part Four- The Coast

1) Day Six-Caesarea



I don't really believe that Catholicism has changed its spots and put 1700 years of anti-Semitism behind. If it were true that Christendom has changed and churches then Christian organizations all over the world would be uniting to condemn the terrorists were trying to take away Jewish lives. It would support the right for Israel to live in peace, which means using the force to break the terrorists and keep order in the

land in which the Jews lived. They would recognize the Jews right to live in the land of the Bible.... Israel's position in the Middle East can be compared to the Jewish life in the Middle Ages. During the dark ages Christians said Jews had no right to live among them as Jews. They should convert. Then the Christian princes of Europe (with Martin Luther and the Pope' help) said Jews had no right to live among them. Ghettos were formed. Then Hitler said Jews have no right to live. The existence of Israel should have positive theological significance because of the existence of the Jews as a people. Israel's existence as a people is a gift to the Gentile community of nations. -Giulio Meotti, Italian Journalist

We will leave Efrat in the Judean heartland and drive northwest towards the Mediterranean coast where we will stop in Herodean Caesarea. Caesarea has become a boutique style beachside resort for tourists and upscale Israelis. It has sandy beaches, spectacular views of the sea, and is surrounded by beautiful ancient monuments, a Roman aqueduct, and a Roman amphitheater where concerts are held, in a beautifully excavated Crusader castle.

Although the Crusades took place a thousand years ago, they comprise the unconscious fault lines that still influence politics and economics today. The Crusades were one of the great clashes of civilizations that characterized the first five hundred years of the Second Millennium and that culminated in the Christian re-conquest of Spain and the expulsion of the Jews of Spain in 1492.

The Crusades were not only a battle between the two dominant civilizations of the Mediterranean, Christian Europe versus an Islamic near East and Southern Mediterranean littoral. They were also a clash of two religious ideologies. Each one of these theologies were and remain sure they were the heirs of the Jewish religion. The Christians believed that Christianity

replaced Judaism and argued that anyone who continued to follow the old religion was immoral, contrary, stubborn and against the tide of history which culminated in Christianity.

Similarly Muslims believed that they were the real inheritors of the Jewish tradition and that anyone who still followed Christianity or Judaism was living a life of error. As a result, the history of the surviving Jewish communities of the ancient Mediterranean world was one characterized by periods of tolerance followed by persecution and pogroms, both Muslim and Christian, that continued well into the 20th century and only ended after 1948 and the establishment of the State of Israel.

Some experts reasonably argue that almost all and every attack against Israel by Muslim countries and their European allies are an expression of continued supersessionism. One awaits a long overdue reevaluation of supersessionism by Christian and Muslim theologians.

We will take this opportunity of rest and repose on the beaches of Caesarea to better understand the essence of anti-Semitism, the replacement theology of Christianity and Islam and the theological reasons that a majority of Muslims and so many Christians in today's world still believe that because the Jews rejected their revelations, they do not deserve an independent state in the Land of Israel.

Lecture: The Crusades and the Origins of Anti-Semitic Anti Zionism. For further reading, I recommend [*The Vatican Against Israel: J'accuse*](#), [*Understanding Dhimmitude*](#), and this [article](#).

2) Day Seven- From Haifa to the Sea of Galilee- the Land of the Mishna, the Kabbalah, and the future of Islam;The Bahai



Bahai Gardens, Haifa

We will rise early in the morning and drive up the coastal plain with the Mediterranean Sea on our western side. On our right we will see rising limestone hills and the cliffs of the Carmel range. Carmel means the vineyards of El, or God and it is the area where wine making was re-introduced by Zionists in the early 20th century. We will make a short visit to the archaeological site of the Carmel caves where we will see evidence of the ancient migrations of Neanderthals and Homo Sapiens (early humans) up the Rift Valley from East Africa where they originated.

We will then take a short hike in the Carmel foothills (locally nick named "Little Switzerland"). Then we will drive into Haifa city where we will proceed towards the heights overlooking the harbour and where we will see a panorama of the city while we visit the Baha'i shrine gardens.

Although Muslims see the Baha'i as heretics, it is possible that the Baha'i are a genuine reform movement within Islam. When the Muslim world finally allows its citizens to exercise their personal religious freedom in generations yet to come, it is quite possible that there will be massive conversions to the Baha'i faith, for it allows one to leave Islam without negating its heritage or the validity of its revelation.

From the Baha'i Gardens we will make a short visit to the cave of Elijah the Prophet, a folkloric shrine where Jews, Christians and Muslims still come to make vows and to give thanks to those vows that the prophet Elijah has answered with help from God. Sacrifices of animals take place here, personal acts of religious obligation based on personal vows. At the shrine we get a glimpse of the ancient Israelite and near eastern practices that were common in the land before the centralization of sacrifice at the Temple in Jerusalem.

We will leave Haifa and follow the coastal road to the coastal city of Acco (Acre) where we will have lunch at a traditional Middle Eastern restaurant in renovated structures from the time of the Crusades while we look out over the Mediterranean sea. After lunch we will make a short tour of the excavations in the city.

We will then drive east towards the city of Safad, overlooking the Sea of Galilee and the higher hills of that region. Safad is still home to a number of synagogues, many of them five hundred years old that were built by Sephardic exiles who had left Spain after the expulsion in 1492. Some of the greatest of Kabbalists moved to Safad and it is still a great center for the study of Jewish mysticism and explorations of Kabbalistic books such as the Zohar. Recent research has demonstrated that Kabbalistic writings have had a surprising and disproportionate influence on Renaissance Italian thought.

From Safad we will drive to Tiberias on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. We will visit the tomb of Rabbi Moses Maimonides.

We will go for a boat ride on the lake and spend the evening at a hotel.

For more information, read [*The Talmud: A Biography*](#) and [*Kabbalah*](#).

Part Three-The North

1) Day Nine, The Talmud, The Zohar, and Modern Orthodoxy

Banias

We will rise early in Tiberias and drive to the Golan Heights. We will explore the Hula nature reserve, have lunch at a vineyard and will continue until we arrive at the site of Banias nature and archaeological reserve (with its remains of a temple to the Greek God Pan). We will then go south to Gamla.

Gamla is the site of an ancient city in the Golan Heights. It was founded during the period after the conquest of the Middle East by Alexander the Great. It came under the authority of the Seleucid dynasty who are most famous for their aggressive colonization of Judea, and which triggered the Maccabean revolt.

When the Jews of Judea revolted against the Romans, Gamla was one of the last places to fall. It is an important archaeological site, has a beautiful museum and is embedded in a nature reserve with rocky cliffs and a glorious waterfall. Its flora and fauna are like that found on the plateaus of Central Asia and griffin vultures can be seen there. There is also evidence of an ancient Byzantine village. In the nature reserve we find the Gamla and Daliot streams which are fed by the highest waterfall in Israel.

Despite the wide-open spaces, the greenery, and the successful efforts of Israelis to return to the Golan and to rebuild its

ancient Jewish cities, just a few kilometers away lies the now failed state of Syria where a variety of extremist Muslim sects kill each other in the hundreds on an almost daily basis. The Golan provides Israel with the strategic defense against northern aggression coming out of Hezbollah dominated Lebanon, war torn Syria, a destabilizing Turkey and hostile Iran.

We will spend much of the day hiking in the area and in the late afternoon will drive to Kibbutz Ayelet Ha Shachar in the upper Galilee. Here we will spend the night.

The evening lecture will describe the Talmud, the Zohar, and the exceptionally enlightened Rabbi of modern Orthodoxy, Rabbi Cook.

Part Four-The History of Modern Israel

Day 10) The History of Israel

Early the next morning we will explore the Canaanite tunnel beside the kibbutz. From there we will drive back to Tel Aviv where we will have lunch in the Old City of Jaffa. If time allows, we will visit the archaeological site of Megiddo on the way down to Tel Aviv, where according to some Christian theologians the world will end in an "Armageddon." We will return to our hotel, have a final lecture on the history of modern Israel and prepare to fly out in the evening.

And so readers and visitors will have toured the land of Israel in fourteen books. Certainly there is more to read and more to explore, but that can be done on a later visit.

Welcome home.

For further reading, [*Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East*](#) and [*Israel: An Introduction*](#) is recommended.

[Table of Contents](#)

Geoffrey Clarfield is an anthropologist at large. For twenty years he lived in, worked among and explored the cultures and societies of Africa, the Middle East and Asia. As a development anthropologist he has worked for the following clients: the UN, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Norwegian, Canadian, Italian, Swiss and Kenyan governments as well international NGOs. His essays largely focus on the translation of cultures.

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