

[The Origins of Christianity Tour: Part 1](#) [1]

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In October I was privileged to join the *Origins of Christianity* tour to Israel, led by Dr. John Dickson. This was something which I had been looking forward to and planned for a long time, and it really was an awesome experience! I have already done one presentation of the tour for TGIF Stellenbosch; here I want to document my experiences so that I can share it with more people.

This article will be a general discussion about the tour and my experience of it; after it there will be three more articles which recount the tour on a day-by-day basis.

What is the Origins of Christianity Tour?

Dr. John Dickson has a passion for history and the Christian faith, and wants to share this passion as widely as possible. One way of doing this is touring Israel to understand the setting of the gospels: first century Israel. It is important to read the gospels in the appropriate context and to hear Jesus's voice against the backdrop of the world in that time, versus trying to impose our world and circumstances on the story which the Bible tells.

As John Dickson said at the outset, the tour was not intended to be a Christian pilgrimage to all the holy sites and for people to have their intense religious experiences. Those of us on the tour were welcome to do that, but it was not the intended purpose. Indeed, the tour was not even aimed exclusively at Christians, and there were no prayers or the like on the tour (there was at least one non-Christian on the tour).

The tour also aimed to vaguely trace Jesus's journey. For context, it started in Jerusalem and Judea. Then we moved to Galilee, where Jesus was raised and did most of His preaching. Finally we returned to Jerusalem, where Jesus had His final confrontation with the powers of this world. It was not run as a typical tour, where one would complete all the sight seeing in one location before moving on to the next; rather, it was tracing the narrative of the gospels.

Who is John Dickson?

[John Dickson](#) [2] is a pastor, Biblical scholar, historian, and former lead singer of a Christian band. He is a world renowned personality and known largely through his work on projects such as [The Christ Files](#) [3]. He is involved with the [Centre for Public Christianity](#) [4]. At the time of writing, their latest documentary, [For the Love of God: How the Church is Both Better and Worse Than You Ever Imagined](#) [5], performed unexpectedly well in the Australian mainstream cinema circuit and public television. The documentary is launching in the UK, and will come to South African cinemas in 2019.

He is based at St. Andrew's church in Roseville, Australia, where he is the rector. On this tour, his wife Buff joined, and it was her first time visiting Israel.

Where Did You Go and What Did You Do?

I'll elaborate on these in the following posts, but in summary we visited the these locations:

- Jerusalem
- Masada
- Qumran
- Dead Sea
- Bethlehem
- Tiberias
- Sepphoris / Zippori
- Nazareth
- (Beit She'an)
- Sea of Galilee
- Capernaum
- Magdala
- Gamla
- Mount Arbel
- Caesarea Maritima

One of the main attractions of this tour was that John Dickson would be giving lectures relevant to what we would be seeing. These lectures alone were valuable and special. The lectures were:

- How Do Contemporary Scholars View Jesus?
- The Judaism(s) of Jesus's Day
- Galilee and the Beginning of Jesus's Ministry
- Jesus and the Zealots
- Jesus Among the Healers of His Day
- The Women in Jesus's Life
- The Causes of Jesus's Arrest and Death
- What Can Historians Say About Jesus's Resurrection?
- How Christianity Became a World Religion

Why Did I Want to Go On This Tour?

There were three main motivations. The first was to put what I read in the gospels, and much of the rest of the Bible, into context. For example, to see what the geography and landscape look like, how far are places apart from each other^{[1](#)}, and such. We know, for example, about places like Jerusalem and the Sea of Galilee, but what do these places actually *look* like?

The second motivation was the opportunity to tour with a scholar and historian who is well acquainted with the land, as well as the history. He is not sensationalist, but level headed, honest and fair in what he says and teaches.

The third motivation was for a personal project about which I am not yet ready to divulge details. But as such, this was much more of a research trip for me than a holiday. And a good thing at that, as the itinerary was packed and there was an overload of information!

Of course I also simply have a great love of history in general, and Israel is an extraordinary place to experience that. Some of the places which we visited are not mentioned in the Bible, but have a relevance in understanding the context of the political and religious climate within which Jesus lived. South Africans are aware that their architectural history pales in comparison that that of Europe; yet

Israel puts Europe largely to shame when it comes to antiquity, and even pre-history!

Did I Become Into A Messianic Jew?

Definitely not! Ironically, I have had my brush with Messianic Judaism in the past and while I respect and love the Jews who come to Christ, I think there is a fundamental misunderstanding of the gospel for non-Jews to become "Judaised". There is definitely a strong allurement, but too much of the gospel needs to be jettisoned to justify it for it to be wholesome.

What Religious Experiences Did I Have on the Tour?

As I mentioned, the purpose of this tour was not for it to be a pilgrimage to "holy" sites where one could have special experiences. And this did not happen for me (except for one place, sort of, which I'll describe another time). But the sites of the Church of the Nativity, the Western Wall, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, etc. did not impress upon me. They felt very much like the European cathedrals with which I am already acquainted, rather than a reflection of the history which I was after.

I consider this to be a very good thing, and was encouraged by it. In Matthew 27:51 we read that when Jesus died, the curtain in the Temple which separated the Holiest of Holies—where God's presence was—from the rest of the Temple was torn. This is typically interpreted as meaning that there now no longer exists a division between God's people and His presence. His presence, therefore, is no longer "concentrated" in the Holiest of Holies, and it is not necessary for Christians to take pilgrimages to get close to God. Not having strong emotional experiences at these "holy" sites confirmed this for me (in a highly subjective manner).

Did I Get What I Wanted From the Tour?

Absolutely! I am so grateful for the experience and the privilege to have gone. I sincerely want to share what I learned with others who are interested and want to help paint the picture of the world Jesus was born into and lived in for the modern day audience!

Would I Recommend Touring the Holy Land?

I would definitely recommend people go visit these sites, with a couple of caveats. Firstly, do not necessarily expect it to get a "religious experience" from it. As I described above, what I saw was wonderful and amazing history, but God is not found in buildings and geographic locations: He is unbounded and everywhere where there are sincere believers. His presence is not concentrated on the Temple Mount, nor does mystic power seep from the Church of the Nativity or Church of the Holy Sepulcher².

The second caveat is that it is important to do research to make sure you travel with a knowledgeable and dependable tour guide. We encountered so many other tour groups—and before leaving I was told about so many other tour groups which regularly travel from South Africa to Israel—that I do worry there could be a "quantity over quality" problem. Our Israeli tour guide was absolutely first class and we could not have wished for someone better; from having extensive knowledge of the history, to being widely connected and respected by others in the Israeli tourism industry, to understanding the contemporary local culture and having rapport with and the respect of locals, it really could not have been better³. Exercise some discretion before selecting a tour and really try to discover what the purpose behind your tour is, what the agenda of your tour is, etc. This can be difficult to do *a priori*, but at least make some effort before selecting a tour.

Is Israel Safe?

Yes. Airport security is incredibly strict, both travelling to, and leaving, Israel. I nearly missed my flight out of Israel because of various security checks, even though we arrived at the airport three hours prior to departure. Police and armed military personnel are visible, especially in contentious areas such as the Temple Mount, but we never experienced any noteworthy tension and security checks proceeded as formalities. We travelled to the Golan Heights, which is close to Syria, and passed some military exercises, but that was it; as a South Africa, this is not strange or unsettling (I can't say the same for the Australians with whom I travelled).

By my reckoning, Israel is safe to travel in for two main reasons:

1. Men and women (in general, but with some exceptions) are required to do military service (and not merely Jews; Arab citizens of Israel as well). So, most people you would encounter on the street have combat training and can probably kill you, which is a good deterrent for crime and random attacks.
2. Terror attacks won't target tourist areas, because death or injury suffered by tourists (and there are a considerable amount of tourists in Israel) will result in condemnation and possibly retribution of the kind that most militant groups operating in the area would want to avoid.

Walking about at night is probably fine provided one sticks to the same common sense rules I would recommend anywhere: stick to well lit areas, stick to areas with human activity, travel with other people if possible, and do not wander into side streets and allies where it is dark and isolated.

Do You Support Israel?? What About the Palestinians??

This tour was not political and only intended to visit key geographical locations irrespective of the politics surrounding those areas. In that vein, I am not going to discuss the politics of the region or my personal opinions on it. Our Israeli tour leader was open to discussing the politics, but I am not going to go into what was discussed. We travelled to the West Bank to go to Masada, Qumran, the Dead Sea and Bethlehem, and even though we passed through checkpoints, we were never searched, never encountered crowds of protesters or any of the kind. In Bethlehem we saw the infamous West Bank barrier wall, and there our Israeli tour guide, who remained with the group, gave us over to a Palestinian tour guide who took us around for our afternoon in Bethlehem.

That is all that I am going to say. I am not saying that the political situation in Israel is unimportant or irrelevant, but that was not the focus of this tour, and one needs to be able to make that distinction, in the same way we were not on a "Christian" tour, but a tour about the *origins* of Christianity, which was open to Christians and non-Christians alike.

Tell Me More!

In the following posts I'll summarise the tour on a day-by-day basis. The information we obtained on the tour could easily fill a book, so I'll necessarily need to condense it. I'll be happy to elaborate on details in comments, private messages, or in person (if feasible).

- [Days 1-3](#) [6]
- [Days 4-6](#) [7]
- [Days 7-8](#) [8]
- [1.](#) The distances are really not far. Based on where we travelled, I reckon that Jesus's travelling ministry (not including the flight to Egypt) took place in area smaller than having a 125km radius; roughly the size of the Central Karoo (Laingsburg to Beaufort West), or Switzerland.
- [2.](#) Indeed, some of these churches feel like "sepulchres to a dead god", as [Nietzsche put it](#) [9].
- [3.](#) Only Angela Merkel got the better of us, when she visited the Israel Museum, causing it to

be closed when we were scheduled to go there and forcing us to having to go there on another day.

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- [2] <http://www.johndickson.org/>
- [3] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=btM9HZIDWSU>
- [4] <https://www.publicchristianity.org/>
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