

Home (Land) Schooling

Why more Christian universities and colleges are branching out with Israel-based programs.

Why study the Bible in Israel? OK, yes, the answer *is* evident—but it never hurts to hear it stated plainly, as a brochure for one U.S. Christian college put it: “Don’t just read about the Sea of Galilee—visit it!”

Point taken. Nothing beats *going to* the ancient land of Israel to really learn about its history and its people.

Numerous Christian colleges across the U.S. offer opportunities to study in Israel. Each program varies in duration and level of academic detail, but nearly all the schools enable students to pick up valuable course credits while learning within earshot of Jerusalem’s busy streets and beyond.

From lectures held nearby the Old City to archaeological digs where antiquities might be unearthed, each university’s curriculum is designed to provide an up-close and personal learning experience. Many students going to Israel for the first time return amazed by how much their faith is broadened by connecting with the Hebrew roots of Christianity.

As one professor put it, almost every Christian student returns from an academic stay in Israel with an enriched spiritual life. There’s just no comparison between reading about Israel in a dorm thousands of miles away and standing at the actual site where David and Goliath did battle.

“The historical and scholarly perspective truly gives rise to a meaningful spiritual journey and experience with Christ,” one college student told us after her study in Israel. Most important, perhaps, is the reason another student gave us to encourage others to go: “It was the most spiritually intimate

time I've ever shared with God."

Like we said, the answer *is* evident: Learning about the Bible from Israel makes good sense.

Azusa Pacific University
Whittier, Calif.

- **Length: 3 weeks**
- **Date: summer**
- **Cost: \$4,500 (from LAX)**
- **Credits: 3 undergraduate/4 graduate**

"There is no substitute for walking a mile in an ancient Israelite's sandals as one studies and learns about the land and God's people," says Robert Mullins, Ph.D., coordinator of the Israel study-abroad program for Azusa Pacific University (APU).

Mullins is hardly being metaphorical about "walking a mile." Students in the APU program take field trips and do actual map work while learning about biblical events and the sites where they occurred. The five total weeks of study comprise three weeks of travel-oriented learning and two weeks of working at an archaeological dig. All guides in the program hold doctorates in some aspect of biblical studies.

APU's commitment to the learning experience also seeks to expose students to the diverse citizenry of today's Holy Land. To this end, students are required to read three specific books—one for Christians about Judaism written by a rabbi, one about Islam, and one about the life of a Christian

Palestinian. Each challenges students' American stereotypes of the region and its people.

"Students are surprised to learn there is such a thing as a 'Christian Arab.' Most assume that all Arabs are Muslims, and all Muslims are terrorists," Mullins says. "The reality, of course, is much more complex." For many students, the program provides their first glimpse of Christianity practiced apart from the familiar stamp of U.S. conservative-evangelical Protestantism.

Student Maranatha Wall found that traveling with an expert as knowledgeable as Mullins added significant value to her trip. It helped inspire her to pursue a teaching track, and today, after graduating last year from APU in biblical studies, she is studying at Duke Divinity School to become a professor.

For Valerie Haas, a 2009 graduate and student of the program, the vivid perspective of Scripture she gained from her trip is reason enough for going: "The historical and scholarly perspective truly gives rise to a meaningful spiritual journey and experience with Christ."

Bethel College

Mishawaka, Ind.

- **Length: 1 semester**
- **Dates: fall or spring term**
- **Cost: approximately \$12,000**
- **Credits: 1 term**

Bethel College's broad learning experience in Israel is

offered in conjunction with Jerusalem University College (JUC), located on Mount Zion. As Bethel's program literature states: "Imagine being in a place where just 100 yards north of campus you enter the Old City through the Zion Gate. Study biblical history in a classroom, or take archaeology in the Bible lands. Study Hebrew from people who speak it as their native tongue. Don't just read about the Sea of Galilee—visit it!"

Josh Hartsell, assistant director of the Semester Abroad office, says students who prefer to take any of the variety of classes offered by JUC may transfer their credits back to Bethel, where they will be applied to the most equivalent courses.

The midterm program is the most strenuous and competitive, but it, as well as the one-semester program, is open to any interested student, Hartsell says. For students who want a shorter trip, the two-week program is popular and combines intensive hiking with an educational tour of Israel and Jordan.

Chad Loucks, class of 2007, studied geography, history and culture in Israel at JUC for 3½ months. He learned rabbinical thought from a rabbi and studied the history of the Middle East from a professor whose father founded the Israeli secret service. He visited every major archaeological and historical site, and studied four days in Galilee, three days in Negev and a day in Samaria. He lived in Jerusalem and prayed every week at the Western Wall—an experience that he says "changed my life, deepened my following of Jesus and altered my readings of Scripture."

The importance of potential ministers studying in Israel is so obvious to Loucks that he is baffled by ministry or seminary students who have no interest in visiting the Holy Land. "I would rather sit under the teaching of someone who has prayed on the Mount of Olives, walked the city streets of Jerusalem

and has fished in the Sea of Galilee, than one who has learned from a book thousands of miles away," he says. Loucks hopes to return to Israel, concluding that his trip there "was the single best decision I've made in my life up to this point."

Bethel University & Seminary

St. Paul, Minn.

- **Length: 3 weeks**
- **Date: winter**
- **Cost: \$4,000**
- **Credits: 4**

"I will be reading the Bible in a new and exciting light for the rest of my life. I am truly thankful for my experience studying abroad in Israel," says Bethel University student Anna Hachfeld, a senior in biology who took part in the school's Israel program in Jerusalem.

The program at Bethel University (not to be confused with Bethel College) is based at Jerusalem University College and includes classroom coursework—but also plenty of outdoor learning. Students take several day and overnight trips to explore local geography and historical sites and their importance. Program director Gary Long, a professor of Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Studies at Bethel, says students learn mapping, geology, the historical diversity of each location and topography. They are even given a broad-based exposure of Israel from the age of the Hebrew Bible to the Byzantine period.

Hachfeld's favorite recollection is studying one day in Jerusalem where the temple would have been, while enjoying the

breathtaking view of Kidron Valley. Her professor was teaching about Matthew 23:27, in which Jesus tells the Pharisees they are like whitewashed tombs that are beautiful on the outside but filled on the inside with “dead men’s bones.” She learned that while the Pharisees were hearing Jesus teach this from the temple steps they would have been looking straight at the tombs in the hillside above the valley. “How poignant that must have been for the Pharisees,” she says.

Hachfeld, who wants to go into nursing, believes that what she learned while in Israel will help her in whatever God has her do. “Spending time in the Holy Land impacted my understanding of Scripture much more than I ever expected,” she says. “It was a time of understanding more deeply who Jesus was and who He ministered to.”

Evangel University

Springfield, Mo.

- **Length: 18 days**
- **Date: summer**
- **Cost: \$3,400**
- **Credits: 3**

Wave Nunnally, Ph.D., moved to Israel in 1982 to earn his master’s in Hebrew at Jerusalem University College (JUC). Almost every other year since, he’s gone back, usually as a teacher leading groups ranging from 25 to 82 students. That he views the visits as study trips and not tourist tours, there’s no question.

“There is a gigantic gulf between sightseeing versus

developing solid tools of contextualizing Scripture so that we become better readers and proclaimers of the truth of God's Word," Nunnally asserts. "We give students an 'understanding experience' in every area of Israel, not just where tours go."

For example, Evangel's students get to spend a considerable amount of time in the West Bank, one of the main Palestinian areas of Israel. Included in their trip are such places as Hebron, Shiloh, Shechem, Jericho, Jacob's Well and the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim. The Evangel program is in good standing with the Palestinian community, Nunnally stresses, and he says a primary aim of the study program is to offer students the entirety of Israel, not just select bits and pieces.

Evangel uses a team-teaching approach in which more than one teacher is available at all times during the trip to offer a constant hands-on availability of expertise. The trip encompasses Israel, Jordan and Egypt, and is scheduled on even years only, so 2010 is in the rotation. The per-person cost includes everything—airfare, meals, lodging, bus fare, and fees for national parks and museums—and the opportunity is a great one, Nunnally says.

Southeastern University

Lakeland, Fla.

- **Length: 1 semester**
- **Date: spring**
- **Cost: \$15,200**
- **Credits: 15**

The Jerusalem Studies program of Southeastern University in

Lakeland, Fla., enables students to study biblical history, archaeology, the life of Christ and current events in a modern facility in the heart of west Jerusalem. The Assemblies of God recently opened the luxurious George O. Wood center, which houses approximately 45 students and is located only 10-minutes' walking time from the Old City.

The semester-long program includes five weeks of field study in Israel as well as online coursework before and after their stay in the Holy Land. The cost is about \$3,000 more than attending Southeastern for a semester.

Program Coordinator Margaret English DeAlminana strongly encourages students studying religion to sign up. Those who cannot, she says, may still participate in the program every week from Lakeland, when the students abroad call in via the Internet phone program Skype to talk about what they are learning.

For Holly Hungerford, a Southeastern senior who took the trip last year and works in the Jerusalem Studies office on campus, the experience furthered her long-term goal to go abroad to help develop children's ministries in churches. One of her favorite segments of the program was service outreach. She and her group befriended local Arabs by picking up trash in their community and making clothing that was available to them for a donation.

Her trip to Israel also was "the most spiritually intimate time I've ever shared with God," she says. While visiting the Jordan River, Holly was baptized for the first time. "There's just something about being in the land where our Savior was born that just pulls at your heart strings," she says.

T.J. Harrington holds a master's degree in political science, with a concentration in religion and politics. He lives in Florida and is a consultant for political candidates and on

policy-change initiatives.

Check out similar programs offered by other Christian schools;
go to