

Authentic replica: My Holy Land experience

by [John Spalding](#) in the [July 3, 2002](#) issue

On a crisp January morning when most people were struggling with New Year's resolutions or debating whether the Patriots would get to the Super Bowl, I was snapping my fingers to the tunes of the Century Ensemble. The eight-member Christian singing group, decked out in matching red sweaters, stood center stage in a large auditorium as it led an audience in crooning, "I'll Be Home for Christmas." Some might think it strange to be singing carols a week after they hauled their molting Scotch pine off to the dump. But this audience of mostly midwestern retirees stared ahead blankly and intoned, "Please have snow and mistletoe / and presents on the tree."

This was day one of my Holy Land experience—or as I should say, day one of my visit to "The Holy Land Experience." Nestled alongside Interstate 4 not far from Universal Studios in Orlando, Florida, this theme park is a "living biblical museum" set on 15 acres. A nifty attraction, the Holy Land Experience presents, in "elaborate and authentic detail," the history of Israel from 1450 b.c. to a.d. 66. Our Christmas concert was a last-minute switch. Due to rain, managers had canceled an outdoor "historical presentation" at the Temple of the Great King, a half-scale, white-and-gold replica of King Herod's temple. Instead, the ensemble reprised its Christmas medley. "It was a big hit during the holidays," said a female employee in a robe and sandals.

The idea behind the Holy Land Experience is that you enter the park's Jerusalem City Gate and travel 2,000 years back to a "spectacular place overflowing with religious history, rich culture and vibrant activity." The male Israelite characters have real beards and greet you with an authentic-sounding "Shalom!" Less friendly but clean-shaven Roman soldiers stormed past in breastplates and helmets. They seemed pissed off, as I supposed they often were.

Battling with the authentic Holy Land feel are a few incongruities. Music, for example, takes its cue not from b.c. instruments but from Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments*, and it is pumped into every corner of the park. Poinsettias native to Mexico are artistically placed among the aloes and pomegranate, fig and olive

trees—the latter marked as “indigenous to the Middle East.” And on the wall inside Jesus’ empty tomb hangs a helpful sign: “He Is Not Here for He Is Risen.”

Unlike the real Holy Land, the park makes for a comfortable pilgrimage. The Qumran Dead Sea Caves are only 20 cubits from Calvary’s Garden Tomb. To get there you cross the Via Dolorosa, or “way of suffering,” the path Jesus took to his crucifixion. But the Holy Land Experience version of the Via Dolorosa is not particularly somber. Pilgrims following the faux-camel footprints can stop for Milk & Honey Ice Cream and Thirsty Camel Coolers at a concession stand along the way.

Another difference from the Holy Land: everyone who works at Holy Land Experience is a born-again Christian. An ordained Baptist named Marvin Rosenthal created the \$16 million theme park as a nonprofit evangelical ministry. Born Jewish, Rosenthal converted to Christianity as a teenager, attended Dallas Theological Seminary and became a minister in 1968. He has made it his personal mission to bring as many of his former co-religionists as he can to Christ, and the theme park is one of his tools. He founded Zion’s Hope, Inc., which owns and runs the park as “a Bible-believing faith ministry to the Jewish people and the world God so loves.”

Jews have not appreciated Rosenthal’s attention. When the Holy Land Experience opened in February 2001, the Jewish Defense League picketed it for several days, claiming that the “soul-snatching theme park” was an attempt to convert Jews to Christianity. The *New York Times* quoted Rosenthal as saying his goal is to “share the truth of the work of God to all people, including Jewish people.”

Muslims hoping to see the Dome of the Rock should not come to the Holy Land Experience. Nor should Jewish visitors be startled if they enter the Shofar Auditorium for “Inspirational Insights from the Bible,” and receive a sermon on messianic prophecies that urges listeners to “accept Jesus and repent, for soon the Lord will unleash His wrath on all nonbelievers!” Indeed, the Holy Land Experience represents “the land of the Bible where the eternal Son of God came to dwell and will reign over all the earth when He returns.”

Should Jesus return to establish his reign in this biblical land, he’ll first have to cough up \$22 at the ticket window. Then he’ll receive a behavioral policy statement. Presumably even the Lord may be asked to leave the park if he tries to sneak in his pets or some food, or if he wears “any kind of costume” or inappropriate attire, or, according to the “Worship Code,” if he conducts religious activity “deemed by staff

to be causing a disturbance.” Which means Jesus had better not get the urge to overturn the money tables at Methuselah’s Mosaics, a gift shop where they’re asking \$953 for a King David Harp. (The ten-string instrument comes with a certificate of authenticity assuring buyers the replica was made in 1998 by a company based in Evansville, Indiana.)

After the Christmas concert, it was lunch at the park’s Oasis Palms Café. A plaque outside reads: “My Soul Thirsts . . . For the Living God. Psalm 42:2.” Inside, a Moroccan chandelier hangs below a high dome, and water bubbles from a well. The menu offers a mix of Middle Eastern dishes. I was torn between the Sea of Galilee Fish & Chips, a Goliath Burger and the Bedouin Beef Wrap. Still, I had an easier time than the elderly couple in line ahead of me. Though each dish was displayed for review before you approached the counter to order, they were stymied by the exotic names. “This one says ‘Arabian Chicken Wrap,’” the husband said, picking it up for closer examination. “But do you think it’s regular chicken? And what’s it wrapped in?” I finally ordered the Jaffa Falafel and a Diet Coke.

Then I was off to the Wilderness Tabernacle, a 20-minute sound-and-light show depicting worship rituals at the time of Moses. The theater was dark, the stage minimal—a campsite with a large tent like the one used as a temple by the 12 tribes of Israel during their 40 years of wandering through the desert. An old guy with a white beard and dressed in Bedouin garb introduced the show. “Shalom, y’all!” he said. This got no reaction, so he elaborated: “See, we here are the southern tribe, so we say, ‘Shalom, y’all.’” This got a few chuckles. What we were about to see, he explained, explores the Old Testament priestly sacrificial system. “See if you can figure out the meaning of this drama.”

Fortunately, this was not difficult to do. As a narrator’s voice boomed on the sound system, explaining the five types of ancient sacrifice, an actor portraying Aaron, Moses’ brother and the chief priest of Exodus, performed each of the rituals. The highlight of the production was the appearance of a high priest who entered the back of the temple, the holiest of holies, on Yom Kippur. In a scene reminiscent of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, a column of carbon-dioxide fog blasted out of the Ark of the Covenant. Lights flashed and thunder rocked the auditorium.

Spectacular as it was, this ritual on the Day of Atonement, the narrator warned darkly, “provides only temporary atonement.” “Does God have a greater plan?” the high priest asked. “Is our sacrificial system merely a rehearsal for an ultimate

sacrifice? I believe so.” Immediately a nativity image of Jesus flashed on the screen.

The priest’s question was picked up inside King Herod’s temple, which houses a large-screen “Theater of Life.” There a short film titled *The Seed of Promise* repeats, like the tabernacle drama, every 30 minutes. The park literature describes the film as “emotionally immersing.” Each blow of the hammer as Jesus is nailed to the cross echoes across the auditorium. Roman soldiers bang on the temple doors, battering them just as priests attempt an animal sacrifice that, we know by now, is not going to save them. The rest of the film outlines God’s plan for salvation—from the fall of man to God’s demand of a sacrifice from Abraham, to God himself providing the ultimate sacrifice, Jesus. At Jesus’ death, the film shows the curtain of the temple as it tears from top to bottom. In Jesus the Jewish faith is now complete—or irrelevant, depending on your interpretation.

The Jewish community’s dislike for the Holy Land Experience is understandable. The park’s timeline stops at a.d. 66, a few years before the Romans destroyed the temple. Christians have long considered this to be God’s punishment of the Jews for not accepting Jesus as the Messiah. Jews tend to believe that their faith outlived the first century.

In *Travels in Hyperreality*, Umberto Eco writes that the need for replications—from dioramas and wax museums to theme parks—is distinctly American. We are, he says, “obsessed with realism.” For something as intangible as historical information to seem real to us, we must reincarnate it to provide a kind of palpable evidence. Without such a substitute for reality, without an “absolute fake” that stands in for the real thing, Eco says, the American imagination falters. This must be particularly true for believing Christians, and especially for biblical literalists. Would any religious theme park appeal to Jews, whose relationship to their faith and history, not to mention to the Holy Land itself, differs vastly from that of Christians and is so much more a matter of birth and inheritance? I seriously doubt it.

Jewish themes abound at the Holy Land Experience, and its gift shops are well stocked with menorahs and Star of David necklaces. Yet all the visitors I met were born-again Christians. And the park was suffused with the glow and easy familiarity that evangelical Christians tend to exhibit when they’re among their own.

Nowhere was this more apparent than at a talk given at a vast model of ancient Jerusalem in a room adjacent to the Shofar Auditorium. A preacher “archaeologist”

dressed in khakis and Indiana Jones hat used a laser pointer to indicate a stadium. "That's where people 'rassled' in the nude," he said. "Wudn't too smart of Herod, now was it, building a nudist colony next to the temple?" He went on to explain why it baffles him that Jews can't accept Jesus. "After all," he said, "Jesus fulfilled every single prophecy."

As an example, he cited Malachi 4:2: "But for you who fear my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings." "Now," the preacher said, "that may not sound like it's talking about Jesus, but it is. Jesus wore a prayer shawl, and the fringe of that shawl was called wings. So when Mark 5 tells us a woman was healed by touching the hem of Jesus' garment, she was actually touching his 'wings.' Prophecy was fulfilled!"

Then he quickly added, "I defy anyone, Jew or gentile, to deny that."

No one in the room rose to the challenge.