

Session 2

A Holy Land



Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory, along with parts of Lebanon, the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt, western Jordan and south-western Syria, is often referred to as 'the Holy Land'. This part of the world is important in several world religions and Jerusalem has a unique international status as it is a special place for Jews, Christians and Muslims.

Israel is a Jewish state and the majority of people who live there are Jewish, but Christians and Muslims have also lived there for generations, as well as people of other faiths (or no faith). Most people who live in the Palestinian territory are Muslim; Christians have lived in Palestine since Christianity was born in the first century, but the number of Palestinian Christians is decreasing and now only 1-2% of Palestinians say they are Christian.

This part of the world is special to Jews as it is where Judaism began. The Hebrew Bible (which Christians call the Old Testament) contains many stories about people who lived in the Holy Land. It is often called the Promised Land as the Bible tells a story about how God led the Israelites out of slavery in

Egypt to live in Canaan (the biblical name for the Holy Land). A temple was built in Jerusalem and the Ark of the Covenant was placed there. People believed that God lived in the temple and the Ark of the Covenant was a sign of God's presence. The temple was destroyed when the Babylonians invaded in 587 BCE (Before the Common Era) and was later rebuilt. The second temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE (Common Era). The Western Wall in Jerusalem is the one remaining wall of the second temple and today many Jews from across the world visit the Western Wall to pray. Some Jews hope that one day another temple will be built.

For Christians, the Holy Land is important both because of its prominence in the Old Testament and because it is where Jesus spent his life. He was born in Bethlehem, lived in Galilee, died in Jerusalem, and is said to have ascended to heaven from the Mount of Olives near

Bethany. There are many beautiful churches in the Holy Land. You can visit the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, which is where Jesus is said to have been born, or the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, where Jesus is said to have been crucified and buried. This is also where Pentecost took place which was the birth of the Church. Christians in the region provide us with a link to the earliest church communities.

Muslims believe that the Prophet Muhammed (peace be upon him) visited Jerusalem on Al-Burak, his winged horse. Jerusalem is the third holiest site in Islam, after Mecca and Medina. There is a shrine called the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, which has a gold roof. You can often spot the gold roof when you look at pictures of Jerusalem. The Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa Mosque, an important place of worship for Muslims, are located in the area that Jews and Christians call Temple Mount, as it is where the Jerusalem Temple once stood. Because this is such an important site for different religions, there are often disagreements about who should be allowed to go there. Sometimes this leads to violence.

The Baha'i faith is one of the newer world religions. It was founded in 1863 in Persia (now called Iran), and today its headquarters are in Haifa in northern Israel. The headquarters, called the Universal House of Justice, have beautiful gardens that are popular to visit. Baha'is believe that there is one God and that Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Mohammed all carried messages from God to humanity.



Activity

Using a map of the Holy Land, see if you can find sites that are important to different religions.

- Jerusalem
- Bethlehem
- Nazareth
- Haifa
- Babylon – this city has a different name today! Can you find out what it is and find it on a map? You will need a map that covers a bit more of the world than just the Holy Land. After the first Jerusalem temple was destroyed, important Jewish people were exiled to Babylon (sent to live there against their will).

Prayer

In many towns and cities in the Holy Land, you can hear the *adhan* five times a day. The *adhan* is how Muslims are called to prayer. Watch this video to hear the *adhan* from Al-Aqsa in Jerusalem. You will also see some pictures of the Dome of the Rock and inside the Al-Aqsa Mosque. Beautiful *Adhan* from Masallah al-Aqsa – <https://youtube.com/watch?v=z2xEwSi2vaI>

One of the most important prayers for Jews is the *Shema Yisrael*, which is traditionally recited in the morning and the evening. The words are: “Hear, O Israel, the LORD is our God, the LORD is one.” This passage is in both Jewish and Christian scriptures – look Deuteronomy 6:4 up in a Bible.

Look up the words of the *adhan*. What similar ideas are there in the *adhan* and the *Shema Yisrael*? What do the prayers tell us about Islam and Judaism? What similarities are there with Christian beliefs?

Write your own prayer that could either call people to worship or be used for a morning or evening prayer service.

Activity

There are lots of different restaurants and shops throughout the Holy Land that cater to different dietary requirements. In Judaism and Islam, there are rules about what people can eat. Muslims who eat meat, for example, must make sure their meat is *halal* ('lawful'). This means that the animal was treated well and slaughtered painlessly, and prayers were said as it was killed.

Food that Jews are allowed to eat is called *kosher* food (meaning 'fit' to eat). Jews are not allowed to eat meat that has blood in it and they must not mix meat and dairy. Both Muslims and Jews avoid eating pork as it is considered unclean.

Design a menu for a feast for Jews, Muslims and Christians to share. If you can, try making the food and eating it together! Make sure you ask the people you are sharing it with if they have any dietary requirements that you need to take into consideration.



The Golden Rule

The Holy Books of each of the three main religions in IOPT, and indeed in many other faiths too, contain what is known as the 'Golden Rule'.

- You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your kinsfolk. Love your neighbour as yourself: I am the LORD. — *Leviticus 19:18, The Torah (Jewish Scripture)*
- Do to others what you want them to do to you. This is the meaning of the law of Moses and the teaching of the prophets. — *Matthew 7:12, The New Testament of the Bible (Christian Scripture)*
- [The] Prophet said: “As you would have people do to you, do to them; and what you dislike to be done to you, don't do to them.” — Muhammad, quoted in an Hadith, *Kitab al-Kāfi (Islamic Scripture)*

How would following this golden rule make a difference to the way you deal with other people? How hard/easy do you think it is to follow it?

Some people might say that the situation in IOPT has religion as one of its causes, and it can often be made more complicated by prejudice against those who follow a particular faith. Looking at this golden rule, which appears in all the Abrahamic holy books, do you think that the conflict is about religion or do you think there are other issues at stake too? How do you think that differences about faith can be overcome?

What opportunities do you have to learn about faiths and cultures other than your own?
How can you begin to break down prejudice?

