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# **IS NOTHING SACRED?: JEHOVAH’S WITNESSES AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BIBLE LANDS**

**by George D. Chryssides, York St John University UK**  
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[This presentation summary is part of a longer chapter entitled “Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Middle East”, and will appear in *Minority Religions in Europe and the Middle East*, edited by the author.]

Jehovah’s Witnesses (JWs) are unlikely to accept Mircea Eliade’s notion that space is not homogeneous, and that there are locations that offer special manifestations of the divine. JWs do not recognise special sacred places, although they attach significance to the Holy Land as the terrain on which the majority of the events of the Bible occurred.

It might be thought that Jehovah’s Witnesses have problems with Israel’s sacred sites. Many of them are owned by the mainstream churches, which JWs regard as promoting “false religion”, being part of Babylon the Great. Many, if not most, are of dubious authenticity, and there are rival sites, indicating a lack of certainty about the true locations of biblical happenings.

JWs are willing to visit sites that are owned by churches, for cultural reasons. They commend those features that support their faith, for example if the tetragrammaton is displayed, but they dislike features that come from extra-biblical sources, such as classical mythology.

Regarding authenticity, Witnesses acknowledge that the city of Bethlehem is the authentic site of Jesus birth, but point out that controversy regarding Jesus birth place is recorded in the New Testament (John 7:41-43), thus indicating that the Church of the Nativity does not reliably pinpoint the site of the Nativity. JWs believe that Charles Gordon’s location of Golgotha has some plausibility, while the adjacent Garden Tomb is believed to have been built in the eighth century BCE, and hence cannot be authentic. There are a few Watch Tower articles that discuss such issues.

Visiting the Holy Land also affords the benefit of getting to know the area’s topography. This enables visitors not only to receive an impression of the terrain, but to draw conclusions regarding the biblical narrative. For example, when visiting the Holy Land in 1951-52, the third president Nathan H. Knorr concluded that the weather was too cold for shepherds to be in the fields in late December, an observation that undermines the mainstream dating of Christmas as 25 December. The area of Megiddo is too small for all the

world's armies to engage in combat, thus reinforcing their belief that Armageddon will be a spiritual conflict, and not a physical one.

Despite reservations regarding authenticity, JW's have their own tour companies – Meander Tours, and Bethel.org, who organise visits to the Holy Land. These companies also encourage tours of religious interest within Britain, such as the British Museum, where Witnesses can find support for their beliefs in biblical archaeology. In the United Kingdom, the London Bethel is also a favoured destination, where JW's can find information about Watch Tower history and see how the Society's publications are produced and disseminated.

There may not be special sacred spaces for JW's, but they hold that “all earth belongs to Jehovah” (Psalm 24:1). This suggests that the earth's resources are to be cared for, and that ultimately there are no national boundaries, which will disappear when the whole earth is restored under Jehovah's theocratic rule after Armageddon. Although there are no special sacred spaces, other phenomena are special for JW's. There are special people – namely those who are in “the truth” and who will experience life in the coming new world, and the 144,000 who will reign with Christ in heaven. There are special times, as indicated by the Bible, and interpreted by the Watch Tower Society's chronological reckonings. This calendar of events will culminate in the end of Satan's rule over the world, to be superseded by Christ's, who will bring everlasting peace and prosperity to the whole earth.

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