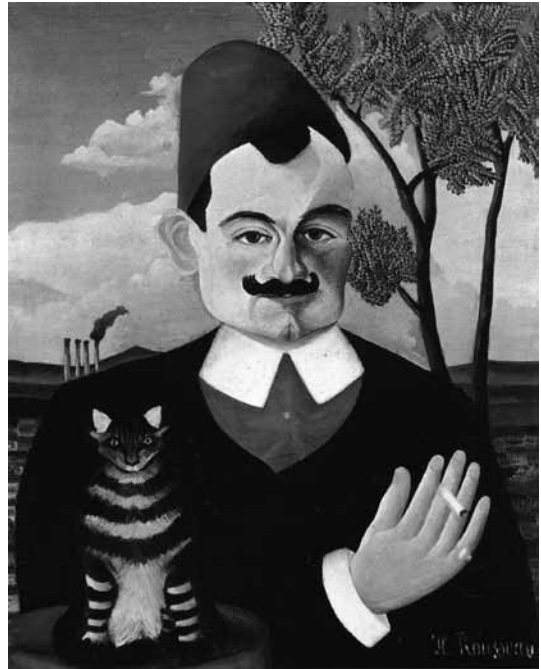


Pierre Loti's Perplexed Pilgrimage to Jerusalem

Abdul Karim Abu Khashan

This is the second part of Abu Khashan's exploration of the French writer and traveler Pierre Loti's journey to Palestine in 1894. The first installment, "Pierre Loti's Journey Across Sinai to Jerusalem, 1894," appeared in the Autumn 2010—Issue 43 of Jerusalem Quarterly.



Glorifying Jerusalem while lamenting its lost splendor, Loti commences this volume¹ with an epigraphic first chapter:

Jerusalem! What dying splendour
clings about the name! How it
radiates still, out of the depths
of time and dust! Almost I feel
that I am guilty of profanation in
daring to place it thus, at the head
of this record of my unbelieving
pilgrimage.

Jerusalem! Those that have
walked the earth before me have
already found in it the inspiration
of many books, books profound
and books magnificent. All that
I am going to try to do is to
describe the actual aspect of its
desolation and its ruins; to tell
what, in our transitory epoch, is
the degree of effacement suffered
by its great and holy shade, which
a generation soon to come will no

Portrait of Monsieur X (Pierre Loti) by Henri Rousseau (1844-1910), kept at Kunsthaus Zurich, source: wikimedian Xommons.

longer be able even to discern.

Perhaps I shall tell also of the impression of a soul – my own – which was amongst the tormented spirits of this closing century. But other souls are in like case and will be able to follow me; we are of those whose lot it is to suffer the gloomy anguish of the present day, who stand on the brink of the dark chasm into which everything seems destined to fall, there to perish utterly; who nevertheless can still descry, in the scarce distinguishable distance, rising out of all the outworn trappings of human religions, the promise of pardon which Jesus brought, the consolation and the hope of heavenly reunion. Oh! Surely nothing else had ever any reality. All the rest is void and negligible, alike in the theorisings of the great modern philosophers as in the arcana of millenary India and in the visions of the inspired and marvelous seers of the early ages. And thus, out of the depths of our despond, there continues to ascend towards Him who once was called the Redeemer a vague, desolate adoration....

Verily my book will not be able to be read and endured save by those whose great grief it is that they once possessed and now have lost the Only Hope; by those who, doomed as I to unbelief, come yet to the Holy Sepulchre with a heart full of prayer, with eyes filled with tears, and, for a little while, would linger, kneeling, there...²

Loti's opening chapter of his book *Jerusalem* is more than just a literary introduction to an ordinary journey. Instead, he contemplates a journey delving deep into that place for which so many people yearn and to which so many pilgrims flock, hoping to gain redemption. Yet Loti sets himself apart from these faithful pilgrims in his "unbelieving pilgrimage" while retaining the sense of a quest, perhaps hopeless, for a spiritual peace in Jerusalem's "great and holy shade" – a shadow that may be effaced in the coming generation. Jerusalem's mountains, valleys and plains, and even dwellings, are, for Loti, all part of a scene sunk deep in time, but a time that is passing. Born in 1850 and dying in 1923, Loti sees himself as "amongst the tormented souls of this closing century," a figure staring into a "dark chasm."

Pierre Loti experienced acute internal bouts of spiritual and psychological conflict, even while making this pilgrimage. He constantly expresses his lack of belief and weakened religious convictions, particularly when contemplating the simple believers around him as they perform their religious rites with unshaken faith and piety, untinged with doubt. Loti regards such people – whether Christian, Muslim, or Jew – with some misgiving, even derision. When he compares his behavior with theirs he feels that his spirit has forsaken him, and his faith abandoned him, leaving his soul to disintegrate into dust and be blown away by the wind.

As Loti narrates his account of the journey, always recording the exact day in 1894 at the top of each entry, he aims not only to provide chronological progression and continuity – though this is extremely important – but also to express his vision, to epitomize the attitude of his contemporaries as well as those who will come after

him. He seeks to cast all that within the framework of the dialectic between life and death, faith and unbelief, and the linking and disjoining of heaven and earth. As we travel with him, we can discern, through Loti's almost photographic lens, particulars of human behavior and manner of living, including what people eat and drink, and what they wear. We enter with him into the mirror of ourselves, though we know beforehand that Loti does not tell the whole truth.

From Gaza to Bayt Jibrin

Loti offers some interesting details of his journey from Gaza to Jerusalem. The Kurdish Ottoman governor of Gaza had helped him, assigning two men from the military garrison to accompany him through the vineyards and groves of Gaza. He describes the water sellers (saqqa) he saw crowding around the wells and loading their donkeys with full sheepskin water bottles. He then heads northeast of Gaza city in the direction of Hebron, making a small detour from the road to Jerusalem in order to visit the tomb of Abraham.

Given Loti's "unbelieving pilgrimage," it is notable that he was extremely assiduous in setting all his observations and remarks against a Biblical background, particularly the narratives of Jesus. Perhaps this is only to be expected of one writing for a French audience intimately linked to a Biblical vision. Yet Loti's description does not stop at presenting scenes of the Holy Land and recalling relevant verses from both the Old and New Testaments. He goes beyond that to see those locations as lands stolen from him and his crusader forefathers. He regards every stone in a house, every dome atop a mosque, every rock set in a wall, as witnesses to that loss. Edward Said remarks on this same phenomenon in *Orientalism*: "In contrast [with his British counterpart] the French pilgrim was imbued with a sense of acute loss in the Orient. He came there to a place in which France, unlike Britain, had no sovereign presence. The Mediterranean echoed with the sounds of French defeats, from the Crusades to Napoleon."³

Loti was clearly aware that the Holy Land belonged to all its inhabitants, the adherents of all three monotheisms. He also knew that the majority of the inhabitants were Muslims. Yet, like so many of his predecessors, he continuously expresses unease at the Muslim presence in this land, while apparently not realizing that many of the local inhabitants are Christian.

It is telling to consider Loti's mixed reaction to the muezzin's call to prayer, where he expresses irritation and perhaps loss, but also calls it "exalted." Even when he feels in harmony with the people (the Palestinians) whom he encounters, whose generous hospitality and warm welcome he constantly acknowledges, there is an undercurrent of deep-seated unease that mars his spiritual journey, making him aware that there is another vision, a different culture, that occupies this place and shapes its identity.

At the end of the first day, 26 March 1894, Loti arrives at the heights overlooking a Palestinian village, Bayt Jibrin. He halts before the beautiful verdure of the plants, blossoms and trees that fill the valley of Bayt Jibrin, to exclaim,

Truly a valley of the Promised Land, “flowing with milk and honey.” Green it is, with the exquisite green of springtime, of a meadow in May, amid its hills, which olive-trees, vigorous and superb, cover with another green, magnificently somber....

On one of the hills stands the little old Arab village to which the innumerable herds are brought for the night. While our camp is being set up, on the tall flowered grass, there passes before us an endless procession of cattle and sheep, which climb to the enclosure of its earthen walls, conducted by long-robed, turbaned shepherds, like saints or prophets. A number of children follow, carrying tenderly in their arms the new-born lambs. The last that come to plunge themselves into the narrow streets of dried mud are many hundreds of black goats, which make their way in a compact mass, like a long unbroken trail, of the colour and sheen of a raven. Truly it is amazing what this hamlet of Bayt Jibrin is able to hold! And as all these beasts pass, a wholesome odour of the stable mingles with the perfume of the peaceful countryside.

The pastoral life in olden times is still to be found here – the life of the Bible, in all its grandeur and simplicity.⁴

This pure, spiritual occasion could have inspired Loti with all the positive significations of the Holy Land. Here is a little hamlet, a visual manifestation of the Promised Land imbued with the imagery of grace and repose. Yet very soon afterwards Loti transforms the moment, as the mood degenerates into an opposite one of estrangement and gloom following the muezzin’s call to dawn prayer:

At about two o’clock in the morning, when the night casts its darkest shadow over this country of trees and herbage, the sound of voices singing, very plaintively, very softly, issues from Bayt Jibrin, passes over us, and dies away in the distance of the sleeping and fragrant fields: an exalted call to prayer, reminding men of their nothingness and their death. The muezzins are shepherds standing on their earthen roofs, and they sing all together in a kind of perpetual fugue; and always it is the name of Allah, the name of Mahomet, surprising and gloomy, here, in this land of the Bible and of Christ...⁵

One might say that Loti’s personality appears enigmatic and contradictory to the careful reader. In his writing Loti appears to be divided against himself. At one instant he describes a moment of spiritual illumination and emotional serenity, then he suddenly reverses himself to reveal the other side of the occasion, a most pessimistic and nihilistic side. One might call this the Adamic syndrome, after Adam’s dissatisfaction with the felicity of Eden that drove him to disobedience and the loss of the garden, leaving him grieving and yearning for his lost paradise.

One scholar notes the turmoil in Loti’s personality as a writer, explaining it by what he called the aesthetics of ruins.⁶ It is an interpretation of what Loti senses is the

collapse of the visible world into nothingness and chaos. He had treated this theme in his prayer-like address to Jerusalem at the beginning of the book, surveying history through present circumstances to arrive at one and only one certainty: death, and the void, terms that for him always destroy the beauty of the occasion, plunging him into endless existential anguish.

Bethlehem, Town of Dreams, Town of the Old East

Loti describes a moment where dream and reality intermingle when he first sights Bethlehem on the distant horizon:

And all at once, very high in front of us, on the summit of one of the most distant of the pearl-grey mountains, appears a little pinkish-grey town, vague of colour and outline, like a town of dreams, seeming to be almost too high up above the low regions in which we are; cubes of rose-coloured stone, with minarets of mosques and steeples of churches – and our guide with his indolent Arab gesture points to it and says: “Bethlehem!”

Bethlehem! There is still such magic in the name as to blur our vision. I rein in my horse so as to drop behind, for tears come into my eyes as I contemplate the sudden apparition; seen from the depth of our ravine of shadow, raised high amid those cloud-like mountains, it calls to us like a supreme fatherland. One would not have imagined these tears, which yet are sovereign and not to be denied, infinitely desolate and yet strangely soothing too, a last prayer, beyond all utterance, a last homage of remembrance, at the feet of the Comforter we have lost.⁷

Upon entering Bethlehem this poetic depiction gives way to a realistic and more immediate visual scene, an instance of what may be called “description from within”:

.... But Bethlehem is still, at least in certain quarters, a town of the old East in which there is much that is interesting to be seen.

As at Hebron, cubes of stones, vaulted with stones, and looking as if they had no roof. Passages, narrow and dark, where our horses slip on the large, shining paving stones. High blunt walls that seem to be as old as Herod. In these walls a few, a very few, little arched windows.⁸

Loti’s rapturous devotion to Bethlehem in the earlier passage clearly represents the encounter in his mind between the real and imaginary “town of dreams,” a site of pilgrimage. The panoramic beauty of this “pinkish-gray” town set in pearl-grey mountains, is vividly evoked, but it is the beauty of history and scripture that bring tears.

Thus, when Loti experiences the city at close range as a “town of the Old East,” his reaction is close to shock, or let us say the uniting of the self with its object. The concrete



Loti on the day of his reception at the Académie française on 7 April 1892. Photographer unknown, photo in public domain.

details of a living town pull the picture out of its imaginary framework and into actual visual and sensory perception. When this happens the scene loses much of its visionary radiance and degenerates into physical sight that looks closely at commonplace details under roofs and between walls. As the poet Mahmoud Darwish put it, “the way home is more lovely than home.”

The culture of the traveler or tourist, even of the pilgrim, has its own standards against which it measures experience. These models and norms usually belong to a foreign culture, that of the traveler, and anything that does not conform to or approximate them can be perceived as alien or even condemnable. In all cases it becomes a matter of perplexity or wariness. Here is Loti describing the apparel of women in Bethlehem at that time:

The beauty and costume of the women constitute the special charm of Bethlehem. Pink and white, with regular features and eyes of black velvet, they wear a tall rigid headdress, spangled with silver or gold, which is something like the hennin of our Middle Ages, and covering this a veil à la vierge of white muslin, which falls in ample religious folds. The sleeves of their jackets, which are usually of some striking colour and covered with old-fashioned embroideries, are cut short above the elbow so as to display the very long pagoda sleeves, tapering to the wrist after the fashion of our fifteenth century, of the under robe, which falls straight to the feet and is generally of a dark green. In these costumes of past ages they move about, slow, upright, noble - and, with it all, very simply pretty all of them, under the whiteness of these veils which accentuate a strange resemblance, especially when they carry in their arms a little child: one might imagine, at each turning of the dark old streets, that he saw appearing the Virgin Mary, such as she is shown to us in the pictures of our Primitives.⁹

This view of the women of Bethlehem undoubtedly has a religious frame of reference, corresponding to the widely-known depictions of the Virgin Mary in Western art, including from Loti’s contemporary Renoir in his *Assumption of the Virgin*. Yet Loti indirectly alludes to the archaism of such dress. By calling the women simple Loti

seems to imply backwardness. While linking the “special charm of Bethlehem” to the “beauty and costume of the women,” he does not discern that the charm of Bethlehem and the elaboration of women’s dress emerge from a living culture with distinct features. As Jacques Berque, a twentieth-century French scholar on the Arab world and Islam, observed, “the culture of the masses, or what is called folklore, is a nation’s true culture. This is because such a culture finds its expression in people who might not know how to read and write, so that we can find people who are cultured to the core, yet are illiterate. This was prevalent in various Islamic countries. Conversely, it is possible to find many countries where there is no illiteracy whatever, yet the people are without any culture either.”¹⁰

Arrival in Jerusalem: the Debris of Every Epoch

Loti leaves Bethlehem for Jerusalem on 29 March 1894. The weather was stormy and very cold, with heavy rain and strong winds. His first impressions of Jerusalem were thus hardly joyous. Even when the rain temporarily ceased, clouds would engulf the surrounding hills in a thick and blinding fog that kept him from viewing the distinctive panorama of the city. As Loti draws closer the general outlines of the city begin to appear. To the left is a desolate view of humble, plain dwellings. To the right the main features of the city and its numerous arches become visible through the famous wall that has distinguished the city in various forms across the ages. To make things worse, in addition to the heavy rain, which prevented Loti and his companions from fully experiencing their approach to the holy city, they are met at the entrance by a loud train whistle that startles his mount and breaks the flow of his thoughts. Then,

We reach at length a deep hollow, at the foot of an ascending road, between the commonplace and pitiful mass of buildings which cover the hill on the left – hotels, a station, factories – and the tenebrous embattled walls which cover the hill on the right. People of all nationalities encumber the approaches: Arabs, Turks, Bedouins; but most numerous of all are white faces from the north, which we had not expected to see, long blond beards under fur caps, Russian pilgrims, poor moujiks clothed in rags.¹¹

Clearly Loti was discomposed and in no mood to accept the place for what it is. He continuously compares the actual scene with the deeply imbedded image he had formed through reading and the exercise of his imagination. Loti looks for the vision he had previously formed from a wealth of verbal descriptions, visual representations, and tales: stiff and formalized images that bear little relation to the city teeming with humanity.

Despite, or perhaps because of his crisis of faith, Loti made sure his arrival coincided with a religious season, that of Easter. Yet this compulsion was not the

only one that drove him to endure so much suffering and expose himself to the many dangers that beset this journey. We must also recognize a literary compulsion that is not often taken into account: Loti's skill at description, particularly of exotic sites, and his love of travel literature, generated in him a powerful incentive to write. His writing is not merely a record of the visual scene before him, however significant that might be. He goes beyond that to infuse his description with personal feelings, and to express his vision and philosophy through that admixture. Most important of all is his talent for employing a truly remarkable vocabulary, through which he is able to arrest his reader's attention in outstanding descriptive passages. Add to this the exotic and unfamiliar nature of the scenes he contemplates, chords he often strikes, using them intelligently, albeit with more than a bow towards the stereotypical image of the Middle East precipitated through the ages since the Crusades.

Entering Jerusalem was potentially an occasion for a profound exploration of the physical setting and for a historical and spiritual contemplation of its significance. Yet Loti preoccupies himself and his readers with what he sees as the desolate faith of the local inhabitants, with denigrating their religious symbols, and with the Arab and Muslim tendency to steal the property of others, including religious symbols. Perhaps this would not surprise us if we recall that Loti's first audience was intent to preserve and perpetuate their stereotypical views of Arabs and Muslims. Thus, when he and his companions visit the al-Aqsa mosque and the Dome of the Rock, he finds desolation, indeed a "melancholy desert," even while standing awestruck in front of the Mosque of Omar.

We make our way through narrow streets, dismal in spite of the sun, between old window-less walls, made of the debris of every epoch of history, with here a Hebraic stone, there a Roman marble. As we proceed the character of the place becomes more ruinous, more empty and more dead, until we reach the sacred quarter, infinite in its desolation, which encloses the Mosque itself. All its approaches are guarded by Turkish sentries, who bar the way to Christians.

Thanks to the janissary we pass through this fanatical ring, and then, by a series of dilapidated little gateways, reach a gigantic platform, a kind of melancholy desert, with grass growing between the flagstones, in which no human being is to be seen. It is the Haram-esh-Sherif (the sacred enclosure).¹²

But then Loti concludes his description of the Haram-al-Sharif both with the "enchanted palace" of the Mosque of Omar and with a tendentious allegation that the surrounding buildings have been constructed from the ruin of Christian churches:

... In the centre and at a considerable distance from us, who have entered at one of the corners of the enormous square, stands, solitarily, a surprising building, entirely blue, of a blue exquisite and rare, which look like some old enchanted palace covered with turquoises. It is the Mosque of Omar,

the marvel of Islam. With what a grand and austere solitude the Arabs have contrived to surround their blue Mosque!

....

As we advance into this solitude, paved with large white flagstones and yet overgrown with grass like some cemetery, the covering of the blue Mosque becomes more distinct: it seems as if the walls were overspread with variegated jewellery in open-work, half of pale turquoise and half of vivid lapis, with a little yellow, a little white, a little green, a little black, soberly employed in very fine arabesques. Among some withered cypresses, some very old, dying olives, a row of secondary kiosks, scattered about the centre of the esplanade, make a sort of retinue to the marvellous Mosque in their midst: little marble mihrabs, slender archways, little triumphal arches, a colonnaded kiosk, which also is coated with blue jewellery. And all this, so broken down by the centuries, so melancholy, with such an air of abandon, on this immense square where the spring now has placed around all the flagstones garlands of daisies, buttercups and wild oats! On a close view, one perceives that these elegant and frail little Saracen buildings have been made out of the ruins of Christian churches and ancient temples; the columns, the marble friezes are all incongruous, taken here from a chapel of the Crusades, there from a basilica of the Greek emperors, from a Temple of Venus, or perhaps from a synagogue.¹³

One may say that Loti's contradictory view is focused on the external aspects of the place. He does not linger for long before the spiritual and symbolic significance of places or people, ignoring, perhaps deliberately, the asceticism and stark simplicity of Muslims, and of Islam generally, in matters relating to external ornamentation, even though these are matters to which Loti attaches great importance in other works, as we have shown earlier.

Perhaps what attracts Loti's attention – as a literary figure and a writer of travel literature, and also as the interpreter of one of the pillars of French culture, the fine arts – are the scene's aesthetic qualities of order and harmony. He pauses lengthily before the fine miniatures in the Dome of the Rock, describing the intricate artisanship that had gone into the intermingling of colors and materials, and going into detail about the use of gold, marble and precious stones, as well as the tapestries and Persian and Turkish carpets that cover the interior halls of the mosque. Yet the human element is almost entirely absent. The actual worshippers, their rituals and prayers, remain for him accessories, secondary and insignificant intrusions in relation to his focus of interest.

This is not to say that Loti totally neglected the cultural values of Islam and the Islamic concepts that inform local social traditions. In the first part of this study, (see JQ 43) we noted how he contrasted his observations of social justice and fraternity among the Muslims of Turkey against the slogans current in France, preferring the actual application of these principles in Turkey to the lip service they receive in France. But what interests us here is the absence of such considerations in Loti's

writing about the Arabs of Palestine, a matter which will be investigated in a study of Loti's *La Galilée* (1896) that we hope to undertake at a future date.

Meanwhile, in Jerusalem, our attention is drawn to Loti as he tours the old city in the evening, experiencing varied emotions as his ears are beset by church hymns closely followed by the voice of the muezzin in the holy month of Ramadan:

The canticles of the Sisters of Zion can no longer be heard, but other religious cries, excited and strident, ascend together from different points of the town, traversing the air like far-flung rockets: the muezzins, singing the Moghreb! Oh, Jerusalem, holy for the Christians, holy for the Mussulmans, holy for the Jews, a sound of lamentation and of prayer goes up from thee unceasingly!...¹⁴

At another point, when Loti and his companions enter the church of the Tomb of the Virgin Mary, he provides a detailed description, remarking on the stairwell's antiquity and acrid smell of damp, but more astonished to find a corner next to the tomb set aside for "Mahometans," as he calls Muslims:

.... And in a corner near the tomb, among the so many Christian symbols, there is even a little mihrab for Mohammedans, who cultivate, as we know, a special devotion to the "Lady Mary, Mother of the Prophet Jesus."¹⁵

Rather than noting the symbiosis of Muslim and Christian worship, here, he seems to disapprove of the "Babel that is Jerusalem" in his description of the funeral of a Russian archimandrite taking place there that evening:

Near us – who are watching him, standing against the old iron gates – are some Mussulmans, on their knees, their backs turned disdainfully on the procession, praying to the Lady Mary before descending to her tomb. They wear the green turbans of pilgrims who have been to Mecca; their grouping and their prayers constitute an element of purest Islam, which mingles quaintly with the old Russian orthodox rites of this procession. The whole thing is characteristic of this Babel that is Jerusalem....¹⁶

At Gethsemane

Loti is most deeply moved when he arrives at the church of Gethsemane. He recalls the story of the Passion that he had heard and read hundreds of times before finally reaching its setting. He pauses long moments in reflection, attempting to absorb the mix of imagination and reality:

... I would have preferred silence. For the first time in my life, with feelings strangely stirred, I am about to visit that place the mere name of which, even at a distance, exerted a deep and moving spell; and I did not look to see all these people.¹⁷

Loti proceeds with his account of the visit to Gethsemane, surprising us with a condemning reference to its guardian monks, and a characteristic expression of disillusionment:

To gain admittance to the Garden of Gethsemane, which is situated some yards farther on, at the side of the Mount of Olives, we have to knock at the door of a convent of Franciscan monks who are its jealous guardians
...[The garden] contains eight olive-trees – which must be at least a thousand years old, if indeed they were not contemporary with Christ – but they are enclosed within rails lest the pilgrims should pluck their branches... decked with the common flowers of spring, yellow gilliflowers and anemones. But there is now nothing in this little enclosure to remind us of the great past. The monks have done this wonderful thing: they have made of Gethsemane a mean and trivial thing. And one leaves it with a disillusion the more and a heart of stone.¹⁸

Obviously Loti's pilgrimage to Jerusalem was a quest for some glimmer of faith. He attempts to hearken to the inner call that spurs him to seek certain sites, under the guidance of scripture and certain exegeses and commentaries. Thus he relays some detailed historical explanations and analyses by a priest in a white robe who resides in Jerusalem (le Père Blanc), whose elucidations go beyond an individual interpretation of scripture to an analytically historical view that does not fit in well with the more literary account of this pilgrimage. Here he is discussing certain sites, historical periods, and how the Church of Gethsemane and its environs changed over time:

On an evening of this same season of spring, at the end of a day such as this, Jesus must have passed this very spot! Evoked by the identity of place and season and hour, there comes suddenly into our minds a vision of this ascent of Christ to Gethsemane. The wall of the Temple – which has now become the wall of the Haram-esh-Sherif – stretched above there then as it does now, outlined perhaps against similar clouds. Its lower courses, composed of the great stones of Solomon, were those that we still see; and its southern corner, which overhangs the abyss so superbly, rose into the sky at the same place. Only all this was then larger, grander, for these walls of the Temple, buried now some seventy feet in the prodigious accumulation of earth and debris, used to be a hundred and twenty feet high instead of fifty...¹⁹

Pierre Loti and the Jews

Pierre Loti's attitude towards the Jews is thoroughly influenced by the Christian religious narrative. Although he occasionally admits pity, he is mocking and derisive. The mainspring of Loti's attitude is the belief that the Jews committed the greatest sin by crucifying Christ, and in what follows we will look at some repercussions of this view:

It is Friday evening, the traditional hour at which, every week, the Jews repair to weep, in a place specially conceded to them by the Turks, over the ruins of that Temple of Solomon "which shall never be rebuilt." And we want to reach this place of wailing before nightfall. After the empty ground, we arrive now at narrow little streets littered with refuse; and, finally, at a kind of enclosure, filled with the movement of a strange crowd which wails in a low, rhythmic chorus.²⁰

Loti then proceeds to describe the place where the Jews gather on Fridays to make their lamentations. He accepts the view that the Wailing Wall is part of the Temple of Solomon, citing the "monstrous uniform blocks" as evidence of that. He then depicts the Jews standing against the wall "beating their foreheads against the stones and murmuring a kind of tremulous chant."²¹

Next he describes their garb and features employing typical nineteenth-century European stereotypes:

The robes are magnificent. Black velvets, blue velvets, violet and crimson velvets, lined with valuable furs. All the caps are of black velvet trimmed with long-haired fur which throws into shadow the blade-like noses and the sinister eyes. The faces, which half turn to look at us, are almost all of a special, almost an uncanny ugliness; so narrow, so emaciated with eyes so cunning and tearful, under eyelids heavy and dead!²²

One passage from this section has Loti bringing together the various elements that constituted the contemporary racist stereotype of the Jew:

In penetrating thus into the heart of Jewry my chief impression is one of astonishment, discomfort, almost of fear. Nowhere have I seen such an exaggeration of the type of our sellers of old clothes, rabbit-skins, and odds and ends; nowhere, noses so pointed, so long and so pale. I have a fresh shock of surprise each time one of these old backs, vaulted in velvet and fur, makes a half-turn and a new pair of eyes gives me a furtive, sidelong look from between hanging curls and from under spectacles. Truly the crucifixion of Jesus has left an indelible stigma. Perhaps it is necessary to come here to be fully convinced of it, but it is beyond dispute that that there is some

particular sign imprinted on these foreheads, a brand of shame with which the whole race is marked.²³

Loti continues with his discourse on the Jews, their prayers, invocations, and wailing, even quoting the chant of the rabbi and the congregation's responses. He dwells on the aged Jews, who have come here to die, raising their arms and shedding hot tears, yet he remains unmoved by their plight, comparing them unfavorably to the Arabs whom he had so recently denigrated:

In issuing from this haunt of the Jews, where one experiences, despite himself, I know not what childish fears of robbery, of the evil eye and witchcraft, it is a pleasure to see once more, instead of bowed heads, the upright and noble carriage of the Arabs, instead of skimped robes, ample and flowing draperies.²⁴

Pierre Loti: An Orientalist with a Difference?

In attempting to answer this question we will need to highlight certain aspects of Loti's experience. All writers, particularly those whom we consider great, have their own style and vision, and will not replicate another's experience. Yet at the same time a writer may be influenced and build on another's work. Writing about the orient became a widespread phenomenon in the nineteenth century, and was undoubtedly linked, amongst writers and statesmen, to non-literary spheres such as economics, religion, and politics. Inasmuch as Napoleon had been influenced by the writing of certain orientalist, so his 1798 campaign might have consequently inspired many writers to head eastward and record their views and ideas concerning this orient that is at once so near and yet so mysterious.

Loti's account of his journey to Jerusalem was certainly influenced by the huge mass of chronicles and literary works that had been piling up since the time of the Crusades. Furthermore, despite his wide travels and his affection for the region, I do not believe that he held a radically different attitude towards the people, geography, or culture of this orient than his peers. In many respects he failed to escape the superiority complex that taints the work of his orientalist predecessors, and his characterizations of Arabs as "savage Bedouins" have the arrogant mark of the privileged Frenchman and naval officer that he was. Yet there were differences in a more minor mode. As a writer, he had not only a distinct literary style but also remarkable ability to interact with his subject to the point that he appears self-contradictory, even schizophrenic, in his writing. His contradictory views of Islam suggest its attraction for him, as well as repulsion. Considering that composition for him was a highly emotional state rooted in movement and place, he is often an exceptionally vivid narrator, albeit one that we must sometimes consider unreliable. Nevertheless his ability to strike something of a balance between narration and description does distinguish his style to the point that prompted some to

compare him to Marcel Proust. In his journey to Jerusalem he was able to present loss and disappointment with a degree of confession and honest self-revelation that makes his account more lasting than the diatribes of many a nineteenth-century European traveler.

Abdul Karim Abu Khashan is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Arabic Language and Literature at Birzeit University.

Translated from the Arabic by Alex Baramki.

Endnotes

- 1 My discussion of the author's preceding work, *Le Désert*, "Pierre Loti's Journey Across Sinai to Jerusalem, 1894," appeared in *Jerusalem Quarterly*, 43 (Autumn 2010), 18-30.
- 2 Pierre Loti, *Jerusalem*, trans. W. P. Baines (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Co., [1930]), 1-2. All subsequent references are to this edition. This undated early 20th century English translation reflects the style and vocabulary of Loti's late 19th-century French. The original spelling has been retained.
- 3 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 169.
- 4 Loti, *Jerusalem*, 4-5.
- 5 Loti, *Jerusalem*, 6.
- 6 Henri Le Maitre, *Dictionnaire Bordas* (Paris: Bordas, 1985), 1431.
- 7 Loti, *Jerusalem*, 23.
- 8 Loti, *Jerusalem*, 26.
- 9 Loti, *Jerusalem*, 26-27.
- 10 Jacques Berque, *Il Reste un avenir: entretiens avec Jean Sur* (Paris: Arlea, 2002), 127.
- 11 Loti, *Jerusalem*, 38-39.
- 12 Loti, *Jerusalem*, 59-60.
- 13 Loti, *Jerusalem*, 60-62.
- 14 Loti, *Jerusalem*, 82.
- 15 Loti, *Jerusalem*, 104.
- 16 Loti, *Jerusalem*, 106-107.
- 17 Loti, *Jerusalem*, 107.
- 18 Loti, *Jerusalem*, 109.
- 19 Loti, *Jerusalem*, 113-114.
- 20 Loti, *Jerusalem*, 115.
- 21 Loti, *Jerusalem*, 115-116.
- 22 Loti, *Jerusalem*, 116.
- 23 Loti, *Jerusalem*, 117-118.
- 24 Loti, *Jerusalem*, 120-121.