

# Jerusalem as Text: Taking Barthes to Town

Stephen Bennett

*The city is a discourse, and this discourse is actually a language: the city speaks to its inhabitants, we speak to our city, the city where we are, simply by inhabiting it, by traversing it, by looking at it. Yet, the problem is to extract an expression like "language of the city" from the purely metaphorical stage... The real scientific leap will be achieved when we can speak the language of the city without metaphor.*  
Roland Barthes, 1967

In reading nearly any account of Jerusalem, it is at times difficult to differentiate between impressions of the "heavenly" Jerusalem and "the Jerusalem on Earth," as they each have been imbued with myriad overlapping religious and historical meanings. This overlap is most prominently reflected in narratives produced by religious European pilgrims in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries whose encounters with the earthly Jerusalem were a bitter disappointment.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the city's history, Jerusalem has been subject to an array of visitors' "aspirations, inner anguish, and dreams" imposed "on what they envisioned as an eternal sacred city, whereas the worldly city was at great variance and often in contradiction with these imaginings. This vision of the city of God has always been in contrast with the living physicality of the city."<sup>2</sup> When considering the "heavenly" attributes scripture bestows on Jerusalem, these reactions to the very real squalor of an ancient city should come as no surprise. Despite these disappointments, dominant narratives continue to elevate Jerusalem to the status of a prized possession of the Abrahamic religions. Yet this high status concurrently subjugated Jerusalem to an existence determined by a colonial mindset, pitting religious and ethnic communities

against one another in a quest for possession of the "holy city."

The disparity between competing national and religious histories projected upon Jerusalem as a "holy city" may be viewed through Maurice Halbwachs' concept of collective memory. Collective memory identifies history as a social product, highly motivated and malleable, and subject to contemporary community needs. Issam Nassar discusses the ways in which collective memories of Jerusalem diverged as "Generations of Jews, Christians, and Muslims first learn about Jerusalem through the tales of their elders, stories they learn in religious (or Sunday) schools, and from reading holy books." Each different channel "invariably focuses on a small fraction of the general history of the city," gives these narratives linearity, and "connect(s) the city to their community alone."<sup>3</sup> Collective memories are cultivated to meet ideological, nationalist, or religious needs, and so they must also take on aspects of exclusivity, primacy, and accessibility for the communities whose interests they serve.

Halbwachs theorized on the power and malleability of collective memory through the storied history of Jerusalem, for when European Crusaders took the city, they arrived with "the authority of an immense community" and "felt that behind them operated the pressure of innumerable generations."<sup>4</sup> The Crusaders did not find the expected embodiment of heaven on earth as described in scripture, but instead the squalor of a Jerusalem that was the product of "successive sieges that had left no stone unturned, of reconstructions, of changes in the directions of the streets, in the situation of and appearances of houses and districts."<sup>5</sup>

The Crusaders that Halbwachs describes are one of numerous conquerors who through "a new system of localization could retrieve these vestiges" of Jerusalem, "absorb them, but also modify them, thereby changing their appearance and meanings."<sup>6</sup> In this sense Jerusalem's urban landscape is itself a text that has been written and re-written, subject to erasure and omission, selectively read and purposefully disseminated according to the ideological needs of its conquerors. Even a cursory look at Jerusalem's history demonstrates how its landscape has been repeatedly loaded with meanings exclusive to those in power or holding "ownership" of Jerusalem at each given time period. But since the late nineteenth century, the Zionist movement successfully attached nationalist myth to the widely held Judeo-Christian religious myth with astounding success. As the international community and media speak of "facts on the ground" in Israel and the Occupied Territories, it becomes clear that the physical Jerusalem is treated as a text as much as the "heavenly Jerusalem," and is still made to conform to the "reality" preferred by its conqueror. In this sense, there seems to be little difference between the treatment of Jerusalem during the Crusades, the British Mandate period, or since the Six Day War of 1967. Furthermore, a textual analysis of Jerusalem reveals that it has most recently been subject to even more selective erasure as a product of modern Orientalism.

The obligatory framing of Jerusalem as a city important to the three Abrahamic religions, as a prize of the Crusaders, or a flashpoint in the Arab-Israeli conflict is found in nearly all literature on the city. The last two decades have fortunately seen the emergence of researchers who arguably represent a second wave of analysts of the



Israeli-Palestinian conflict (the Israeli New Historians among them). In my reading of their work, these researchers' scholarship is not overly beholden to religio-nationalist narratives of Israel, Palestine, or Jerusalem. Rather, they lend a critical eye toward such and produce incisive work that eviscerates idealistic myth and undercuts the ideologies that produce the marked intractability of the conflict. Scholars like Ella Shohat and Salim Tamari have contributed to a more lucid viewpoint through which to observe Israel-Palestine and often use methods of textual deconstruction with extremely useful results. In similar vein, historian Issam Nassar poses some important and difficult questions specifically on the historiography of Jerusalem:

Is it possible to write a history of modern Jerusalem without falling into the traps of religion, national, or sectarian histories? Is it possible to write a history of the city in modern times without having to rely extensively on Western travelogues, diplomatic documents, and the like?... And is it possible, in this day and age, to write a narrative that does not fall into the teleological trap that takes legitimization of one of the sides in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as its ultimate goal?<sup>7</sup>

These questions exemplify difficult issues contemporary scholars of Israel-Palestine must grapple with today if we are to displace western hegemony and religious myth from Jerusalem's future historiography.

Unfortunately, work in this newer scholarship on Israel-Palestine comes up against well-funded and highly coordinated public relations and media machines that perpetuate nationalist, religious and historical myths in regards to the Arab-Israeli conflict. There is no doubt that the conflict over Israel-Palestine now transcends the tangible conflict "on the ground" or on the international diplomatic stage, as it also consists of disparate and parallel discourses that wage actors' battles in the realms of media and policy. Modern texts on the region are presented with starkly contrasting imagery: one person's "Security Wall" vies with another's "Separation Wall" or "Apartheid Wall." Every descriptor for any aspect of the conflict or manifestation of the occupation evokes sharply different but highly meaningful sets of associations and connotations, and terminology clearly reveals the political position giving rise to it. Writings on the history and status of Jerusalem comprise an integral part of this discursive battle. If any solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict is to be found, this path of critical scholarship must be pursued in order to shake the foundations, from the rhetorical to the substantive, upon which the conflict finds itself.

Instead of retreading familiar historical ground, we should approach Jerusalem in a way that allows us to explicate what the earthly "holy city" represents and communicates as a text. Through an examination of Jerusalem as a communicative text one can further analyze its formative discourses and the myths instilled in its architecture, as well as addressing the ideologies underpinning its creation. But approaching Jerusalem's historical and current landscape without regard to political, historical, or ideological pressures is a task much easier prescribed than done. As



suggested by Barthes in the opening quote above, simply by inhabiting or viewing a city, we are also readers of that city and subject to its discourse. Any academic approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is equally fraught with linguistic pitfalls, as it will of necessity contain metaphors and analogies – it is in deeply convoluted and contentious topics such as this that the sheer inadequacy of language is revealed. Terms like “occupation” and “terrorism” are presented by the media and policy makers as if they capture the complexity of meanings they intend to evoke; and inadequate language in turn fails to do justice to human experience. These highly loaded and diverging discourses call for semiological methods of analysis.

My initial approach here incorporates Roland Barthes’s earlier ideas on the concept of a collectively understood “myth” underlying signs, and so I begin by using relevant semiological concepts of space and the urban environment in the structuralist tradition. The aim is not primarily to identify the myths underlying the history of Jerusalem, but to reveal what the propagation of those religious and nationalist myths necessitates in regard to textual treatment of Jerusalem. This treatment involves social and textual signifiers of territoriality, diachronic descriptors, and a revolving door of significations underlying certain sites. I will then briefly analyze the textual characteristics of post-1967 reunited/divided Jerusalem and examine the Orientalist discourse dictating its development.

In 1967, coincidentally a pivotal year in the Arab-Israeli conflict, Roland Barthes delivered his lecture “Semiology and Urbanism.” Barthes’s lecture calls for a “semiotics of the city” because “human space in general...has always been a signifying space.” In “Semiology and Urbanism,” Barthes seems taken with Victor Hugo’s *Notre-Dame de Paris* and his “conceiving the monument and the city, actually as a writing, as an inscription of man in space,” and the “rivalry between two modes of writing, writing in stone and writing on paper.”

Semiological conceptual frameworks inform us that texts and discourse are powerful in that they create our perceptions of “reality” through complex and interconnected networks of signs which call to one another *ad infinitum*. There are numerous examples, beyond the written word, that can be considered a text, including the built urban environment of a city. The reality constructed by a city has a particularly powerful effect due to the sheer scale of space that an urban environment encompasses. There is also a pervasiveness of the city as a space of habitation, and its existence as a text someone is always “reading,” traversing, and inhabiting. The presence of the textual elements of a city and environment involves a constancy few other texts of human experience require and profoundly influences our interactions with other “readers” of that text. A city “is the built environment that becomes a key influence on everyday behavior, attitudes and activities,” and the manner in which “people relate to the urban environment will reflect their individual differences and the diversities of their past experience.”<sup>8</sup> As mentioned earlier, in the case of Jerusalem these experiences are often constructed outside one’s self and in another time, instilling exceptionally deep sensibilities of collective ownership exclusive to the reader’s community. Semiological analysis also provokes the question



of how groups' interactions are formed while reading vastly different historical or social texts within the same urban environment, in its landmarks and architecture, or neighborhoods and traditions.

The malleability of collective memory is present in the city's semiotic signifiers being "like mythical beings, of an extreme imprecision, and because of a certain moment they always become the signifiers of something else: the signifieds pass, the signifiers remain."<sup>9</sup> One place of great consequence where the signifiers shift is on cartographic maps. Barthes identifies geography and cartography as "a kind of obliteration, a censorship objectivity has imposed upon signification."<sup>10</sup> In the distribution and differentiation of lands, one could interpret maps as being "constructed like a language," seeing binary oppositions contained in this language of the city through "hot countries and cold countries; then on the opposition between men on one hand, and monsters and chimeras on the other."<sup>11</sup> We can also uncover an "ultimate conflict between signification and reality itself, at least between signification and that reality of objective geography, the reality of maps."<sup>12</sup> Barthes states that the same neighborhood on a geographical map can be given different social significations, rendering the city's readers "radically split in the image of the city" because "signification is experienced in complete opposition to objective data."<sup>13</sup> Cartography as a practice requires the choice of one signifier over another, lending primacy to one history, association, or ownership.

It is notable that visitors, pilgrims, authors, and mapmakers alike often employed anachronistic names for holy sites in Jerusalem if the existent landscape did not communicate the history desired by its viewer. If the undesirable symbol could not be destroyed or replaced, it would simply be renamed. In historical photographs and maps the Dome of the Rock is often labeled as what a Jewish or Christian viewer wished they were seeing in its place: Solomon's Temple.<sup>14</sup> According to Rehav Rubin, in order to emphasize the Christian character of Jerusalem, while concurrently minimizing its Jewish elements, "many mapmakers also sought to undermine Muslim rule and Muslim presence in Jerusalem, and in some cases even...defame Islam and its symbols." One 1493 map by Hartmann Schedel depicts the Second Jewish Temple on fire, representing its destruction in 70 CE, but the building that is actually burning on the map is the Dome of the Rock. Again according to Rubin, "it seemed quite clear that the author meant to depict on his map not only the historic event...but also the victory of the Church over both the Jewish Temple and the Muslim Mosque."<sup>15</sup> Similarly, the Ottoman-era minaret near Jaffa Gate is now commonly referred to as the "Tower of David" in an attempt to cover its connection to Islamic history and Judaize its meaning.

Rehav Rubin also examines how "sacred space and mythic time" affected the making and terminology of early maps of Jerusalem, where "the sacred and the real are placed at odds with one another." Rubin explains that some of the cartographic depictions created by European pilgrims were written "according to the Holy Scriptures" but "had no relation to realistic topography."<sup>16</sup> This is partly due to these maps being created with a "diachronic sense of time," which "depicted, side by side,



figures and events from various historical periods, as if the dimension of time did not exist at all." As a result, these maps functioned "more like illustrated commentaries or historical encyclopedias for reading the Holy Scriptures" than as objective, scientific maps.<sup>17</sup> This diachronic representation was intended to create a "mythic time" where the biblical history can deliver its "meaning and spirit" in order to "transform earthly Jerusalem into a mythic space."<sup>18</sup>

The historiography of Jerusalem, where history is set against scripture, certainly requires diachronic analysis, but in an altered form from that usually used in semiology. Diachronic analysis, usually employed as a method for observing evolution in the coding schemata of signs, should in the case of Jerusalem be adapted in a way that accounts for the concurrent deployment of more than one myth at a point in history. It could also be developed in a way that further unlocks the discourse used to portray a city devoid of change in time which leaves no room for differentiation between the Jerusalem of the past and present. Often, according to Zionist literature, Jerusalem had fallen far from its biblical glory when incoming Zionist immigrants "made the desert bloom." Yet Jerusalem was by no means the "provincial backwater," "shriveled town" or "dirty Levantine town" often mentioned in these histories.<sup>19</sup> Jerusalem had in fact experienced changes that "constituted a milestone in the process of modernization and revival of the city," beginning with Egyptian rule under Muhammad Ali Pasha and continuing throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>20</sup> Similar to the desired meanings and terminology of its holy sites, historical periods would be selectively unearthed and the present overlooked in Jerusalem. In this sense, observers look past the city and use the text to transport them to a desired time and location.

The function of language in the social and linguistic construction of our "reality" is clearly seen as Jews and Arabs each construct their own Jerusalem through language: "al-Quds" in Arabic and "Yerushalayim" in Hebrew. Similarly, Jews and Arabs use different names for various sites: "Bab al-Khalil" or Hebron Gate for Arabs is known as "Shaar Yafo" or Jaffa Gate for Jews. The simple use of different linguistic signifiers seems a "softer" division, as the urban signifieds, the locations themselves, overlap. A more hegemonic use of significations was instituted in the aftermath of the 1967 Six Day War when the captured Arab neighborhoods of East Jerusalem were systematically renamed with more "neutral" Hebrew names.<sup>21</sup> With the metaphorical (and sometimes literal) paving over of past linguistic signs, each subsequently instituted labeling system carries with it a preferred ideological, nationalist, or religious narrative, overlaying the social urban landscape.<sup>22</sup>

Tuomas Forsberg argues that the construction of territoriality is dependent upon a place's value in defining identity; and further, that linguistic metaphor, such as anthropomorphisms of the "holy land" as a body, contribute to these collective constructions.<sup>23</sup> He briefly cites several examples of anthropomorphisms of territory, and suggests in his own anthropomorphic words that the "West Bank can be called the beating heart of Israel, which underlies the indispensability of the territory to the country as a whole."<sup>24</sup> This view is shared by others. In *Jerusalem on Earth*, Abraham Rabinovich describes Israeli settlement and road construction in East Jerusalem in a



markedly historical and religio-ideological manner, claiming that “Spiritually, these corridors have their respective origins not in the foothills below Jerusalem, but beyond the western sea and the eastern desert. Both reached out for the stone walls of the Holy City on the crest of the hills like outstretched hands reaching for a crown.”<sup>25</sup> He later describes post-1967 East Jerusalem as “a metropolitan area *embracing* a good part of the West Bank”<sup>26</sup> (my italics). Territory is also often given feminine characteristics, creating a sense of masculine pride in protecting it.<sup>27</sup> It should be no surprise then when Israelis speak of settlement and road construction in the West Bank as “penetration” and “territorial domination.”<sup>28</sup> Similarly, the loss of West Bank land is often described as a “severing,” much like the loss of a limb. Again according to Forsberg, “These metaphors have direct links to territorial norms such as rights and obligations and to issues of identity.”<sup>29</sup> Jerusalem again presents itself as an exceptional case with its competing Arab and Jewish identities and interpretations of rights, which has surely compounded territorial competition and, in Forsberg’s thinking, can help account for the presence of violence.<sup>30</sup>

Over the course of the last century, the current text of Jerusalem has been written in a particularly hegemonic manner. Historical Jerusalem, if approached on its own terms, could easily be described as a “multicultural mosaic,” where fruitful intercommunal relations were the norm.<sup>31</sup> The Ottoman millet system, which provided autonomy for confessional communities, was reflected in the city’s social fabric, as Jerusalemites enjoyed a great “fluidity of boundaries.” In Ottoman Jerusalem, the boundary between Christian, Jew, and Muslim was so fluid that religious traditions were even borrowed from one another; for example, Muslim and Jewish children would celebrate the Islamic *Eid al-Fitr* and the Jewish feast of Purim together, adopting one another’s religious attire. Perhaps more interestingly, even the boundaries of gender, between cosmopolitanism and traditional modes of life, and between rich and poor were fluid in late-Ottoman Jerusalem. While economic differences existed, all classes of Jerusalemites “lived side by side in urban quarters.”<sup>32</sup> This “cultural mosaic” persisted even after the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in World War I, when Jerusalem, like the rest of historical Palestine, fell under the control of the British Mandate.<sup>33</sup>

However, in the modern era, the religious myth of Jerusalem became secondary to intra-national and international conflict. Through a combination of war aims, colonialism, diplomacy, and ethno-nationalist ideology (Christian, Jewish, and secular Zionism included), western leaders came to accept and adopt the partitioning of historical Palestine, which culminated in United Nations Resolution 181 in 1947. Just as Palestine was divided after the War of 1948, Jerusalem was sliced into an eastern half controlled by Jordan and a western half controlled by Israel. After the 1967 Six Day War, Israel captured the remainder of historical Palestine, including the remainder of Jerusalem, which they soon annexed, declaring the city “reunited.”

What was considered reunification and return within Israeli conceptions of the city was for the Palestinians one more painful loss of territory. This renders the term “reunited” a starkly paradoxical word to describe “a site of demographic and physical



competition between two populations aiming at substantive achievements with clear political purposes of control and sovereignty.”<sup>34</sup> What was Arab East Jerusalem now sits in the middle of “a contested Israeli-controlled municipality three-times the area of the pre-1967 city (due to unilateral, and internationally unrecognized, annexation).”<sup>35</sup> Immediately after the end of the Six Day War, Israel instituted a preexisting, long-term plan to reconstruct and repopulate the Jewish Quarter of the Old City with Israelis, after clearing the area of some 3,000 Arab residents.<sup>36</sup> The reconstruction of the Jewish Quarter was one part of a larger plan to form an urban landscape congruent with the Zionist narrative of a continuous Jewish presence in Jerusalem. However, the intercommunal histories and still-existent diverse “fabric of the city contradicts the Israeli nationalist vision of Jerusalem.” As Simone Ricca points out, in order to create a Jerusalem that would fall within “the dominant discourse of Zionism, the urban physical fabric had to be transformed” and Israel had to “appropriate this ‘alien’ Arab city...to reshape it both physically and symbolically.”<sup>37</sup>

According to a report prepared by the Israeli human rights organization B’Tselem, Israel’s primary goal since the capture of East Jerusalem has been “to strengthen Israeli sovereignty over the city by creating a Jewish majority,” and this requires a planned division of the lands surrounding the city in order to exclude Arab villages from the municipality of Jerusalem while annexing the land attached to these villages. Most significant though, is that “demographic considerations were decisive, and planning considerations were only of secondary importance.”<sup>38</sup> While articulating the structure and interrelations of “the functions of symbols in urban space,” in “Urbanism and Semiology,” Barthes identified a tension between signification and tangible function. Barthes also sees “conflict between signification and function” in the city, with semantic content holding priority over practical functionality.<sup>39</sup> Which of the two motivations, function or meaning, takes precedence in Jerusalem, is not entirely clear; and, more importantly, the issue is clearly up for debate.

The obligatory elements for any discussion of Jerusalem have now effectively been switched from religious significations to talk of unification, with a concurrent presupposition of division of historical Palestine, and the pressing removal of the Arab population by Israel. According to Thomas Frederick Saarinen in “Perception of Environment,” this removal is not without great social consequence, as community identification “is closely related to the idea of territoriality and the neighborhood (as a) concept.” Saarinen presents past studies which “clearly indicate that there are great psychic and social costs resulting from the removal of residents from an area for which they have many sentimental associations.”<sup>40</sup> We should reflect on this psychic and social cost, especially when the local urban area of removal is also a site imbued with profound religious significance.

Barthes states in “Semiology and Urbanism” that “if we want to produce the semiology of the city, we must intensify, more meticulously, the signifying division.”<sup>41</sup> The reunification of Jerusalem has created a situation where Jews and Arabs now live in closer proximity. But tellingly, according to Romann and Weingrad, “no mixed Jewish-Arab residential areas have been created” since 1967, while the social



constructions of the communities' respective territories in Jerusalem still overlap.<sup>42</sup> The Arab Palestinian community still views East Jerusalem as "their Jerusalem," while "Jews think of the new residential neighborhoods built on the periphery of East Jerusalem as an integral part of both Jerusalem and Israel."<sup>43</sup> This fact, along with Barthes's approach, demonstrates the importance of understanding the border delineating one Jerusalem from another.

It then follows that the "changing spatial patterns" between Arabs and Jews in East Jerusalem "reflect not only the social distance between these groups, but also the continuing political conflict between them."<sup>44</sup> This is seen in the "respect that the emerging social patterns in post-1967 Jerusalem reflect the overall political conflict and existing power relations." It is plainly obvious from the "facts on the ground" that "since 1967 there has been unequal access to urban space for Arabs and Jews. As a consequence of its overall political control and greater economic resources, the Jewish sector has been able to pursue its territorial goals at the expense of the Arab sector."<sup>45</sup>

The separation of communities, and dispossessing Arab Jerusalemites of their urban territory, became permanent in the form of the "Security Wall" constructed after the Second Intifada. The Wall's carving of the West Bank not only divides Arabs and Israelis, it also physically splits entire Palestinian villages and ruptures social relations between their inhabitants. While the Israeli government cited security concerns in deciding to build the Wall, other motivations are revealed when observing its course. It has also managed to render meaningless the Green Line, which formerly delineated the division between the Palestinian West Bank and Israeli territory after the 1948 War. By its very existence and structure the Wall has effectively annexed hundreds of thousands of acres of the West Bank. What relevance the Green Line holds seems purely rhetorical and limited to references as a basis for peace negotiations, which only further serves to expose the fallacy of the peace process itself. Setting aside its political elements and focusing instead on its base-level rhetoric, the peace process itself is founded upon the presupposition of the impossibility of different peoples co-existing in Israel-Palestine. The social and physical partition of Israel-Palestine is already present when the negotiating parties come to the table, as a preexisting and irrefutable truth.

What has not been said within the discourse of the Arab-Israeli conflict is that it was ideology, and not actual circumstance, that presupposed the necessity and desirability of physical and social separation. (One would in turn wonder whether the circumstances that resulted in division would have even manifested, had separation not been blindly accepted as a basis for resolution in Israel-Palestine.) Edward Said linked the Zionist ideology with his articulation of Orientalism, a discourse that effectively essentializes Eastern and Western civilizations, creating a binary opposition between them. As we fit the Orient into a framework with Western models used as the standard of comparison, it then defines and articulates what is civilized "us" and the inferior "Other."

In taking the present condition of divided Jerusalem into account, Edward Said's comments on Zionism seem quite prescient. In his view, "Orientalism governs Israeli



policy towards the Arabs throughout.” In the Orientalist mindset, the Palestinian who dared resist the division of Palestine was “either a stupid savage, or a negligible quantity, morally and even existentially.” Said’s commentary is even more applicable in regards to divided/reunited Jerusalem, as he notes that under Israeli law, “only a Jew has full civic rights and unqualified immigration privileges; even though they are the land’s inhabitants, Arabs are given less, more simple rights: they cannot immigrate and if they seem not to have the same rights, it is because they are ‘less developed.’”<sup>46</sup> Israeli Orientalism portrays the Arab mind as “depraved, anti-Semitic to the core, violent, unbalanced.” Said utilizes Barthes’s semiological concepts, stating that within Orientalist discourse, “One myth supports and produces another” and the myths “answer to one another.”<sup>47</sup> As these myths build upon one another they create a discourse and construct a system of knowledge about the Arab Palestinian as the dangerous, undesirable “other.” This is the image that ultimately provides the justifications and lays the groundwork for the permanent division of the social urban landscape in Jerusalem and the acceptance of its permanence.

The Orientalist components of Zionism produce myth upon myth, circularly confirming themselves, on the Arab Palestinian. These myths are employed in the production of textual representations, constructing a reality that requires particular methods for dealing with the unreasonable East. It is this Orientalism that creates the Zionist determination that Arab Palestinians cannot possibly exist in physical proximity with Jews, due to their ceaseless anti-Semitism. The stupidity of the Arabs justifies imperial and colonial rule over their life and land. And most importantly, the inherently violent nature of the Arab Jerusalemite necessitates the absolute division of “reunited” Jerusalem. It is the Orientalist view that places responsibility for the reunification/division of the “holy city” upon the irrational Arab Palestinians and creates the historical account of their responsibility for rejecting the Western-imposed splicing of their homeland. For “there are good Arabs (the ones who do as they are told) and bad Arabs (who do not, and are therefore terrorists).” In keeping with the Orientalist line, we have been told that those “bad Arabs” who do not “sit obediently behind a fortified line” bear responsibility for the complete Israeli conquest of Israel-Palestine and the whole of Jerusalem.<sup>48</sup>

The West’s self-appointed mandate to administer this division is itself Orientalist, as it is affirmed by the West’s sheer power and superiority. This power is not limited to military and economic forms but also exists in the discursive, in the Westerner’s position as the producer of knowledge. In this mode of thought, the Eastern man is passive and “in need of knowledge about himself... There is a source of information (the Oriental) and a source of knowledge (the Orientalist), in short, a writer and a subject matter otherwise inert.”<sup>49</sup> For centuries, Europeans held an Orientalist mirror to generations of Jerusalemites to inform them of the meaning and history of their own city. That same mirror is still being held to Jerusalemites today, dictating to them the future face of reunification/division.

The West’s yearning for Jerusalem is increasingly erasing what it once was, overseeing the rewriting of its urban landscape in an indisputably Orientalist fashion.



Where purely religious Crusades failed in history, nationalism and colonialism attached themselves to the mission and created a discourse that so completely extricated peoples from one another, permanent separation became not an option, but a conclusion. It should be noted that this Orientalist conclusion, which meets Zionist ideological ends, provides the basis for the US-led "peace process." The "peace process" constitutes a tragically misconceived venture, in that the only possible end result is a marginalized status for Arab Palestinians in their historical homeland. The current state of Jerusalem as a paradoxically reunited/divided city speaks to the need for a complete disposal of the Orientalist-Zionist ideology underlying the "peace process" and its propagation of borders that divide peoples from one another, and the adoption of an approach that offers equal credence to all negotiating parties.

What began as religious beliefs became historical imaginings, which were ultimately materialized in the urban landscape and built environment of the "holy city." Roland Barthes states that the city is "a poem which deploys the signifier, and it is the deployment which the semiology of the city must ultimately attempt to grasp and make sing."<sup>50</sup> Today, Jerusalem's signifiers construct a reality of inequity, injustice and marginalization, with social barriers as powerful and visceral as the Separation Wall itself. But the Jerusalems of the past reveal a deeply different deployment of signifiers which informs us of an interwoven multicultural urban society. By articulating the meanings underlying the text of today's Jerusalem, we can perhaps imagine a future Jerusalem free from the anchors of myth and anchored by all of its inhabitants.

*Stephen Bennett is a Ph.D. student in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Minnesota – Twin Cities.*

# Endnotes

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