

# LETTER FROM JERUSALEM

## Pilgrimage: Shaper of Jerusalem

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As a city holy to the three monotheistic religions, the place of Jerusalem is unique, special as well for accommodating pilgrimage to sites which have affinities to each other and overlap to a certain degree. Its unchanged topography has played a reinforcing role: that the last judgment and redemption will occur over its hills and ravines has forged its eternal status in the soul of the believer. For the purposes of this article, I will deal with Christian pilgrimage to Jerusalem and its role a catalyst shaping the present.

The birth of Christianity in Jerusalem was not just a dot on the map of the world. Its ripples travelled beyond the seas, oceans, and continents, creating a new moral code and world outlook. As it struck roots on a global scale, visiting the holy sites became an irresistible driving force in the souls of Christians, whether rich or poor. Palestine became the metropolis of pilgrimage and salvation, intimately connected to the soul. Around the Mediterranean Sea, once the center of the pagan world, a new religion with new temples developed.

In the first millennium of Christianity, most pilgrimage sites were located in the Middle East, in Cappadocia, Asia Minor, Egypt, and Greater Syria. Pilgrims who made the journey by land visited these sites and were impregnated by them. Today, when the term “cradle of civilization” is used, it generally refers to the East and people visualize the physically empty shells, the ruins scattered all over the region. But the Near East constituted the backbone of faith from where divine wisdom flowed, the repository of relics. Pilgrims sought to carry home a chip of a relic as a sacred object to fortify faith for future generations. In the first millennium

of our era – a brief time in the history of human civilization – three monotheistic religions were present on the Mediterranean stage, each one claiming to have the last word on prophecy and human destiny.

Despite initial hostility between Christianity and Islam, tolerance gradually set in with time. The march of Arab armies through Gibraltar and the conquest of the Iberian peninsula had a profound impact on Europe's perception of Islam while in the East on the ground tolerance for Christians continued as evidenced by archaeological finds. Under the Abbasids, there was a shift. Naturally Islam brought with it a new world order in the Middle East, a new geography with shifting borders where pilgrims had to negotiate their way with the new rulers in the Holy Land.

The Crusades, which is usually painted in religious colors, ushered in a major cultural encounter between the East and the West. It was the trigger for an interdependent process which grew stronger in time. Though the Crusades had a violent beginning, a realization set in that East and West had many aspects to share in commercial and cultural exchange. Perhaps this seesaw is a law of Nature. The Crusades taught the West that negotiation can obtain better results than warfare. On the other hand, the architectural and urban heritage that the Crusaders left behind indicated to the East the esteem in which the West held its objects of faith. The Crusades, in my view, was not the beginning of a split between the East and West but rather the launching of interfaith contact.

And indeed, pilgrimage to Jerusalem never stopped. Eastern Christians used the traditional land routes, while Western Christians used the maritime routes, mainly through Mediterranean ports. One of the primary achievements of the Christian faith is the creation of a sacred geography in Jerusalem: after the passage of twenty centuries, Holy Week can be celebrated to its minutest detail in the very sites where the last drama of Jesus took place. Jerusalem is graced with a topography which has not fundamentally changed. The city is also a place where one of the strongest oral traditions has prevailed; the determination of early Christians in the first centuries to remember and pass on the sites and sequence of these events was strengthened by their status as a persecuted minority in the Roman Empire. These memories were corroborated by the Gospels and the writings of the Church Fathers and were followed, in the Byzantine period, by an imperial project to erect sanctuaries that perpetuated these memories of place and event. Quite early, topography was placed at the service of sacred history.

The unbreakable link between Europe and the Middle East made the Holy Land the receptacle of many cultural trends and influences, a kind of melting pot with the exception of theology. Unlike the first millennium where many church councils were held in the East, in the second millennium, the seat of theology was in European universities. Jerusalem itself was not the theater of theological disputes and controversies. The local Christians focused on the safeguarding of the Holy Places. It was easier for local Christians who shared the language and the culture of the rulers to communicate with the local authorities. The only resident foreign fraternity operating in the Holy Land up to the nineteenth century was the Franciscans.

Despite the tensions in the aftermath of the Crusades, Jerusalem remained a travel destination. Starting with the Middle Ages, there are lengthy descriptive accounts, some mentioning the whole pilgrimage journey, others focusing on Jerusalem. Pilgrim literature has provided us with sketches, maps, and reports on local customs and fauna. Tens of thousands of books have been written about Jerusalem. Travel to the Holy Land also stimulated curiosity about the Orient which proceeded until the advent of the Ottomans when Europe felt threatened by Ottoman expansion into Europe. In addition, arbitrary taxation by the Ottomans obliged local Christian institutions to reach out to their co-religionists in various parts of the world for financial support. Catholics looked to European powers like France, Italy, Spain, and, of course, the Papacy. The Greeks turned to Russia while Armenians reached out to far-flung communities across the globe, but particularly in Turkey, Russia, and the Far East. Church emissaries went back and forth to all corners of the earth to fundraise. Along with financial benefits came enriched know-how and exposure to new ideas. With time these overseas connections were institutionalized; many artifacts were sent as votive gifts to the churches in Jerusalem, thus creating art collections of gold and silver objects, textiles, manuscripts and ceramics. Christian art in Jerusalem is a byproduct of pilgrimage. Global pilgrimage made Jerusalem the most international city in the East after Constantinople. Pilgrims returned home bearing the honorific titles of Hajina, Maqdis or Mahdes, carrying these honorifics to their graves.

In the nineteenth century, most technological innovations, such as photography, railways, and modern roads, made their appearance in Jerusalem only a few decades after their introduction in the West. Political developments in the region opened up Palestine to the world, enabling foreign companies, consulates, and organizations to operate in the area. Jaffa and Jerusalem were the main beneficiaries of this policy. In a matter of half a century after 1850, sixty institutions were established in Jerusalem associated mainly with European consulates, Catholic orders, and Protestant churches. Everybody was keen to have a foothold in the Holy Land and one avenue was providing medical and educational services to the local population. As one inspects the architectural landscape of Jerusalem, one finds that one third of present Jerusalem within the present Old City walls is marked by construction activity in the second half of the nineteenth century.

The revolution in the means of transport at that time brought the cities of the East together. Almost every maritime agency had regular shipping lines to Palestine, the most active being the Austrian, Russian, French, and Italian who had stopovers in all of the Mediterranean ports. Similarly, foreign postal services, equivalent to banking services, operated along these routes. The influx of all these institutions and services rejuvenated Palestine, with Jerusalem and Jaffa the centers of gravity. The vast educational network provided the opportunity to learn foreign languages in the newly opened Western institutions. The local population became multilingual, a vital tool for employment, commerce, guiding, and catering. Many chains of hotels and hospices were established to attract Western travelers, the most popular being the Thomas Cook Company.

Greater Syria (Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine) and Egypt were merging commercially, culturally and socially. Regional pilgrimage to Jerusalem became an annual event, stretching from the Lent period through Holy Week. The main means of transport became the railway and shipping lines. One could easily sail from Alexandria or Beirut to Jaffa, or take a night ride on the train from Port Said to Lydda. People intermingled but the greatest occasion was Easter when the city overflowed with pilgrims who rented rooms and stayed with local families. Enduring friendships were established; some ended in marriages: if the bride was from Constantinople or Istanbul it was a status symbol, as women from Istanbul stood for modernity and the latest fashion. Next in the hierarchy came a bride from Cairo or Alexandria. Somewhat latter, a bride from Beirut was also prestigious.

On the cultural level newspapers and books published in any part of the Near East became readily available. Cultural events and trends in Beirut and Cairo were closely monitored. Writers and musicians traveled and gave presentations and concerts across the region. Literature and music unified the Near East.

On the church front, the local seminaries recruited from all over the Middle East. Jerusalem and Bethlehem became for the East the center of the industry of mother of pearl or olive wood *objets de piété*. Crosses, icons, aromatic soap, funeral shrouds, and rosaries were produced and found their markets.

Pilgrimage to Jerusalem created an indestructible link between the Christians of the East, with a calendar of feasts and celebrations. Any pilgrim going back to his or her town or village was a transformed person carrying a luggage of traditions and impressions of celebrations on the very spot where it all took place. The Holy Fire ceremony was a much anticipated and meaningful moment for the Christians of the East, irrespective of their denomination; it unified all – more than any other event on the holy calendar.

The increased flow of pilgrims necessitated modern guidebooks in many languages. A casual perusal of Baedeker at the time reveals a Jerusalem which offered modern facilities. The city became the destination of celebrated writers and royal guests and they have left behind a literary legacy of five thousand books in English alone. Memoirs of resident Europeans provide us with detailed information about how the city functioned.

Archaeology, a discipline hardly two centuries old, arrived very early in the Holy Land. This new discipline added a fresh dimension to our knowledge of the Bible and the Holy Scriptures. The Holy Land and Egypt hosted the greatest number of archaeologists, some of whom spent a lifetime on their projects, shedding new light on the religious narrative. It would be hard to imagine Holy Land studies without the labor and input of archaeological investigation.

At the beginning of the First World War the population of Jerusalem had reached sixty thousand, as opposed to only four thousand in 1826. After the war, the British Mandate consolidated the institutions begun in the late Ottoman period and created a new bureaucracy. Air travel was a crucial element to bring in pilgrims, while on the regional level, cars and buses were instrumental in safe and efficient transport.

During Easter Week, hundreds of buses made their way from neighboring countries. Sometimes they were housed in open fields and tent towns. This mode of travel had a forced end after 1967 for obvious reasons, dealing a serious blow to pilgrimage from the Middle East.

In the twenty-first century, when mass tourism is the norm, patterns are changing. Alongside traditional pilgrimage, we witness evangelical groups who are oriented to the Old Testament and, along with their messianic drive, have a political agenda. There is also a huge growth of Russian and South American pilgrimage which is pietistic. It is too early to predict how this mass tourism will impact the city but we have an obligation to safeguard the integrity of a city shaped by centuries of collective human effort and love.

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