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GP50

Jerusalem:
The Three Religions of the Temple Mount

*Fair in situation, the joy of the whole earth...
the city of the great King.*

PSALM 48:3

One thriving city today rests atop a long and ancient history spanning three millennia of being besieged and captured, destroyed and rebuilt. One city is situated at the intersection of ancient commerce routes and in a region located as a bridge between continents. One city is claimed as the Holy City of the world's three major religions—"as the heart of Judaism, the cradle of Christianity, and the third holiest city in Islam" (Tal 11). One city carries the dual legacy of a neglected town and a living modern capital. One city has a "syndrome" in which pilgrims develop messianic delusions. This city is Jerusalem.

History (brief!):

Two factors determined Jerusalem's location when founded some 5,000 years ago: its ability to provide water and be defended. For these reasons, the earliest inhabitants of the city, the Canaanites and Jebusites, established a city-state there ruling over a part of the central mountainous region. Around 1000 BCE, King David conquered Jerusalem from the Jebusites; his reign hails the start of The First Commonwealth and Israelite Jerusalem during which period the city underwent two phases of growth under Solomon and Hezekiah. In 586 BCE, the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, conquered Jerusalem, destroying the Temple, and sending the Jews into exile. With this destruction the Second Commonwealth began during which period Herod the Great reigned and rebuilt the city extensively, including the construction of the Second Temple. However, in 70 CE, the city was conquered by the Roman Titus and completely destroyed marking the beginning of the period known as Roman and Byzantine Jerusalem. During this period, the city was called Aelia Capitolina and came under the rule of Constantine the Great who in destroying the Roman pagan images instituted Christianity in Jerusalem and constructed the church of the Holy Sepulchre. The Arabs conquered Jerusalem in about 638, marking the Early Arab Period, during which period the city maintained its prosperity and witnessed the construction of the Dome of the Rock. When Jerusalem was conquered by the crusaders in 1099, virtually all its Muslim and Jewish populations were butchered, and this conquest hailed another period of Christian control. However, this was short lived and in 1187 Muslims conquered the city, marking the Ayyubid Period and seven centuries of Muslim rule. The Ottoman Period, beginning in 1516, began with immense prosperity but soon slipped into a sharp decline that lasted for about three centuries, until the middle of the nineteenth century (see figure 1). The thirty years of British rule in Palestine between 1917 and 1948 while short was arguably the most intensive and revolutionary era. The 1948 war heralded a period in which Jerusalem is known as the Divided City. For the next nineteen years, the city was divided in two:

West Jerusalem as a part of Israel and East Jerusalem as Jordanian. In 1967, Jerusalem was united, again, under Israeli rule in the Six-Day War (see figure 2).

Religious Meaning and the Temple Mount

However Jerusalem's true uniqueness does not stem from this long historical legacy but rather from its spiritual meaning. The three major world religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all differ in their fundamental concepts of God, in their creeds of belief, and in their rituals of worship; however, they are united in their attachment to Jerusalem. Jews, Christians, and Moslems regard Jerusalem as "the threshold to heaven" in that it is "the touching point between the divine and the earthly, the place where heaven and earth meet" (Rosovsky 5). As a holy city for the three faiths, the city exists as a site of not only modern day worship but also of religious heritage. Though Jerusalem may be a holy city for these three world faiths, the role it plays for the devoted of each religion varies decisively. For the Jews, Jerusalem is the one Holy City in the world. This is the city in which God chose "to rest his name in" (Deut 12:5) For Christians, Jerusalem is the city wherein Jesus spent the last days of his life. On this soil, he was crucified, buried, and resurrected. For the Moslems, Jerusalem is the city in which the Prophet Mohammed made his Night Journey from Mecca on the miraculous steed, Buraq, to the "furthest shrine" and thence ascended into heaven (Millgram 11).

Despite these clear differences between the faiths and even between the religions' approach to Jerusalem, another common link emerges. The three religions are united by "their claimed descent, by nature, grace, or providential plan, from Abraham" (Peters 37). These three monotheistic faiths of Abrahamic descent become further entwined in Jerusalem, and specifically at the Temple Mount, whose location on Mount Moriah is supposedly the exact location where Abraham traveled to sacrifice his son, Isaac. As stated in the book of Genesis:

"Now it came to pass after these things that God tested Abraham, and said to him, 'Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' And he said, 'Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.'" (Genesis22:1-2).

Therefore, the Temple Mount best represents the incredible intermingling of these faiths as a location that dates to the city's founding by King David and that reveals many layers of history and many religious intersections (see figure 3).

The Temple Mount is a site that holds importance for all of the religions and has done so for centuries. The Temple Mount—currently called the Haram al-Sharif—occupies a sixth of the Old City, an area within Jerusalem's municipal area (see figure 4). Seven sealed gates lead into the Old City; the eighth is sealed and according to Jewish tradition awaits the arrival of the Messiah. The Old City retains the quadrilateral shape and road network of a Roman colony, dating back to 135 CE and is divided into four quarters of unequal size—Muslim, Jewish, Christian, and Armenian (see figure 5).

King David's relation to the Temple Mount dates to the city's foundation. Around the year 1000, King David chose Jerusalem to be the capitol of his empire because the land had not yet been conquered by the Israelites and was not tied to any of the twelve tribes. He could therefore conquer the city with royal forces and use it as a

symbol for a united Israel. David purchased the threshing floor from Araunah the Jebusite, the former king of Jerusalem, on which he erected an altar and consecrated the ground on which the Temple would one day be built. King David transferred the Ark of the Covenant to his new capital city of Jerusalem intending to build a sanctuary for it there on Mount Moriah, the site according to tradition for Isaac's sacrifice (see figure 6). David bequeathed the responsibility of building the temple to his son and heir, Solomon. Solomon constructed a magnificent temple to house the Ark, beginning the process of converting Jerusalem into a holy city.

Another important figure in the long history of the Temple Mount is Herod the Great. Herod has been called "undoubtedly the greatest builder in the history of the country, obsessed by an 'edifice' complex" (Broshi 15). His greatest efforts, though, were directed toward Jerusalem, and in the city, his greatest projects were the Temple and the platform on which it stood. The platform, which has survived to this day, was the largest of its kind in the ancient world. Herod was motivated by "his passion for beautiful and enduring buildings and the winning of his subjects' gratitude if not their love" which he still failed to garner (Millgram 27). The structure itself followed the plan of its predecessor; however, the height and the decorations were greatly enhanced. Christians, too, revere the memory of the Temple for within its walls Jesus visited as a worshiper and teacher.

Located on the northern side of the Temple Mount, the Western Wall, also known as the Wailing Wall, is the sole remaining vestige of the glorious Second Temple constructed by King Herod. The Wall, which was actually not part of the Temple but of the outer wall supporting the Temple Mount platform, remains the holiest site in the Jewish world for it is a symbol of glorious past. Among the various customs at the Wall, also known by its Hebrew name the Kotel, is the tradition of stuffing notes into the crevices—an act of delivery of personal petitions to the Almighty. The massive stones are perfectly fitted to each other so that no mortar was needed.

The Temple Mount for centuries has played a significant role in the Islamic faith. One verse in the Koran refers to the sanctity of Jerusalem, and the Temple Mount more specifically: "Glory be to Him, Who carried His servant by night from the Holy Mosque to the Further Mosque, the precincts which We have blessed, that we might show him some of Our signs" (Koran 17:1). This "Further Mosque" has been interpreted as referring to the Temple Mount and this area's sanctity has been solidified by the tradition of Mohammed's journey from Mecca to Jerusalem on Buraq. This extraordinary steed was tethered to the inside of the Western Wall. Mohammed's ascent to heaven, in which he met many biblical personages, saw paradise and hell, and learned from God's mouth the teachings in the Koran, has been solidified as an article in the Islamic faith with the addition of definitive proof: grooves showing Mohammed's footprints on the Rock.

Another interesting feature of the Temple Mount is Robinson's Arch. Dating from the reign of Herod, the arch has not been preserved and only a remnant of its support can be seen protruding from the southern end of the Western Wall. The arch was named after the American Edward Robinson who first identified the arch in the later part of the 19th century. Probably the first overpass ever to be built in the world, the arch supported a massive stairway ascending from south to north and taking a right turn over the mainstreet below to allow for unhindered traffic. The staircase supported by Robinson's arch led from the Temple Mount to the Tyropean Valley below.

The Church of the Holy Sepulchre, not located on the Temple Mount but still within the Old City, is another important location in Jerusalem. In the fourth century CE, Jerusalem became a center of Christianity when Constantine the Great adopted it as the religion of the Byzantine Empire. His mother, Queen Helena, visited Jerusalem and purportedly discovered the True Cross. During her historic journey in 326, she designated many of the Christian holy sites, and on one of these, the traditional site of Jesus' crucifixion and burial, construction of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre soon commenced. The Church became the focal point of Christian pilgrimage and according to ancient tradition is considered the most sacred site. In fact, many have theorized that the Dome of the Rock was erected in competition to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The Church has also been the site of conflict between the many rivalries of the thirty-five Christian churches and sects. The control is mainly shared between the Greeks, Catholics, and Armenians; and the Copts, Ethiopians, and Syrians have a lesser share of the compound. Ever since the Holy Sepulchre was damaged by a fire in 1808 and hit by an earthquake in 1927, interdenominational quarrels delayed repairs for nearly thirty years.

Earthquakes

The walls of Jerusalem have been shaken not only by perpetual battles but also by earthquakes. Throughout Jerusalem's 3000 year history, a series of earthquakes have struck this religious city. On March 18, 1068, a major earthquake in the Hejaz and northwest Arabia occurred with damages extending to Jerusalem where about 100 people were killed. The roof of the Dome of the Rock was also reported to have been displaced and then returned to its former position. Another earthquake in southern Palestine on November 12, 1458 damaged Jerusalem as recorded in the damages to a minaret and a dome near the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. A series of shocks were reported from southern Palestine on January 14, 1546 that strongly affected Jerusalem. The earthquake lasted a short while but damaged or fissured most of the tall buildings in Jerusalem. The Patriarch of Jerusalem reported the effects of this earthquake which caused the belfry of the Holy Sepulchre to topple onto the Church of the Resurrection. Another earthquake on August 7, 1847 was "distinctly felt in Jerusalem" (Ambrasey 67). People living in Jerusalem today also have no memory of the devastating 1927 earthquake.

Conclusion

Jerusalem, then, as everyone knows, is a city with an ancient history and a long legacy of religious intermingling. As can be seen in the story of the Temple Mount, Jerusalem has witnessed extensive religious struggles, which continue today in political battles over such a holy land. However, it can be known that after centuries and even millennia of celebration in the hearts of Jews, Christians, and Muslims, Jerusalem will maintain a bright if not complicated future.

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