



“If I forget thee . . .”

If one were to look at it dispassionately, Jerusalem should not be all that special. It's a rocky sort of place in the Judean highlands, where the central hills dip and a pass is made between the Mediterranean coastland and the Jordan River valley. A spot of some minor strategic value at times in history, but easily bypassed if need be. Hardly the stuff of dreams. Yet these stony acres of Judean real estate have been lauded and longed for and fought over bitterly for at least three millennia. As it was in the past, so it is in the present, when Jerusalem remains the flashpoint of serious religious and national contention, every inch of it both rich with history and fought over with ferocity. How could such a minor place be so important in the scheme of human history?

Certainly the religious connotations of the city are deeply important to each one of the three major Western monotheistic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. After all, this is the city of David and the Judean kingdom, the location of Christ's most important events, and where Muhammad was taken up into heaven. It is the home of three extremely holy places—the Western Wall, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, and the Dome of the Rock—as well as many other holy sites. The Romans understood the holiness and power of Jerusalem, and after the Jewish revolt of 67–70 CE they attempted to obliterate it forever, not leaving one stone standing on another. Yet, as has always been the case, Jerusalem was eventually rebuilt from the ashes of destruction. If only for these attachments, the place itself would be special.

But the mystique of Jerusalem is more than just its history, although its history would clearly be enough to make it important. No, Jerusalem is important for reasons that go far beyond its location and the religious events and places attached to it. There is a deep longing connected to Jerusalem, as if a physical space could be the locus of human hopes, dreams, and desires. Jerusalem becomes a symbol of human beings' desire for God, for religious community, and for a redeemed world. To spend any time at all in the city is to see the throngs of eager pilgrims trekking

to the holy sites, almost rapturous with their trip of a lifetime to the place that has meant so much to them all their lives.

Even beyond the physical Jerusalem, the city becomes a transcendent symbol of something better than what is now our reality. Jerusalem the new is sung about and prayed for, representing the deepest aspirations of religious communities around the world. Even peoples and nations see themselves as the personification of the New Jerusalem, where God's will and aspirations for humanity will be played out on earth. Religious utopian groups often see themselves as the reestablishment of the holy city: a new, heavenly Jerusalem incarnated on earth. The longing "Next year in Jerusalem" sustains religious communities in the midst of suffering and persecution.

And yet. To spend any amount of time in Jerusalem is also to be acquainted with the traumas, divisions, and human sinfulness that are all too often magnified by these very religious longings. Christian groups fight fiercely for inches of territory and moments of time within the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Fringe Jewish groups call for the destruction of the Muslim holy places in order to rebuild David's temple on the Temple Mount. Muslims rain down stones (and much worse) on Jewish worshippers at the Western Wall. Tensions and security measures in the Old City are both intense, and bombings, stabbings, and shootings are a part of life. It is very easy, then, to become jaded and cynical about the city and to doubt its holiness.

But these very dichotomies—the holy Jerusalem and the profane Jerusalem side by side—are a microcosm of the human condition and of human religiosity. Those who are offended by the shortcomings of organized religion are often dismayed by the gap between the best and the worst of our systems. And that is because the expectations of religion are so high, probably unrealistically so. But that is why, at its core, true religion is about humility and repentance and giving oneself over to the will of God. People do not make things holy; God does.

So thus, back to Jerusalem. The desire for holiness, for a holy city such as Jerusalem is ultimately a symbol of the desire for God's redemption of the world, for God's redemption of us. To understand this is to overcome the inevitable disappointment we have in our humanly constructed systems of religion. Jerusalem is holy because God is holy, and God yearns for the redemption of the world. Jerusalem is the symbol of this because it is in that location that God's yearning and our yearning for redemption have been, and are being, so dramatically worked out.

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