



“Jerusalem of Gold”¹

LAMONTTE M. LUKER

If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!
Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth,
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem
above my highest joy!” (Ps 137:5–6)

THE PSALMS OF ASCENTS

A special section within the canonical book of Psalms is a collection known as the Psalms of Ascents (120–134). Torah commands that Jews ascend to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem three times a year if they possibly can: *Pesakh* (Passover, in early to mid-spring), *Shevuot* (Weeks, or in Greek, Pentecost, in late spring/early summer), and *Sukkot* (Booths or Tabernacles, in the fall). The practice of visiting the Temple Mount is introduced by Psalm 119, an acrostic poem extolling the virtues of following God’s holy law. Each letter of the Hebrew alphabet is awarded

¹ “Jerusalem of Gold” (Hebrew, *Yerushalayim Shel Zahav*) is an Israeli song written in 1967 by Naomi Shemer, describing the Jewish people’s two-thousand-year longing to return to Jerusalem.

Around every corner in Jerusalem is a place deeply connected with the biblical narrative, and with the subsequent history of the three major monotheistic religions. This brief guide to the Old City of Jerusalem surveys the history of the city and its religious associations.

eight verses. Seven is the number of perfection, so eight is perfect plus one! And each letter's eight verses contain seven synonyms for the Law, God's holy will for humankind. This prepares the worshipper to ascend God's holy hill, Mount Zion in Jerusalem, as Psalm 24 instructs (vv. 3–6),

Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord?
And who shall stand in his holy place?
Those who have clean hands and pure hearts,
who do not lift up their souls to what is false,
and do not swear deceitfully.
They will receive blessing from the Lord,
and vindication from the God of their salvation.
Such is the company of those who seek him,
who seek the face of the God of Jacob.

The reference is to Mount Zion, the Temple Mount, where rests the golden Dome of the Rock today. The “rock” is likely the threshing floor that David purchased from Araunah in order to offer sacrifice (2 Sam 24:18–25). Here Solomon built the temple housing the ark of the covenant. Adorned with two cherubim, the latter was nothing less than the earthly throne of God where the divine presence was manifest; many Jews today still back away in reverence after praying at the Western Wall of the Temple Mount.

Just imagine a pilgrim from Galilee who has traveled on foot for a week with his family and friends from his village. Upon getting their first glimpse of the glistening temple, they join in song together:

I lift up my eyes to the hills—
from whence does my help come?
My help comes from the Lord,
who made heaven and earth.
He will not let your foot be moved;
he who keeps you will not slumber.
He who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.
The Lord is your keeper;
the Lord is your shade on your right hand.
The sun shall not smite you by day,
nor the moon by night.
The Lord will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.
The Lord will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time on and forevermore. (Ps 121)

Then upon completing their pilgrimage the entire village would sing:

I was glad when they said to me,
“Let us go to the house of the Lord!”
Our feet are standing
within your gates, O Jerusalem.
Jerusalem—built as a city
that is bound firmly together.
To it the tribes go up,
the tribes of the Lord,
as was decreed for Israel,
to give thanks to the name of the Lord.
For there thrones for judgment were set up,
the thrones of the house of David.
Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:
“May they prosper who love you.
Peace be within your walls,
and security within your towers.”
For the sake of my relatives and friends
I will say, “Peace be within you.”
For the sake of the house of the Lord our God,
I will seek your good. (Ps 122)

In Jewish and Muslim tradition this hill is also Mount Moriah, where Abraham was commanded to bind Isaac (Gen 22), which actually may be the case since it lies precisely a three-day journey from Beersheba (Gen 22:4). By this act of faith, father Abraham prepared the world for God the Father’s offering of his only Son for its salvation on Golgotha, another hill adjacent to Zion. Standing on the Mount of Olives today, one has a perfect view of these two mountains of God—Zion and Golgotha—the glistening golden dome, and behind it the double-domed Church of the Holy Sepulchre built over Golgotha and the Tomb of Christ.

MODERN PILGRIMS

These two hills sit in the middle of what everybody calls the “Old City.” It is, ironically, surrounded by walls that are actually not that old. Suleiman the Magnificent built them in the sixteenth century, about the time of Luther, at the commencement of the Turkish period. The biblical city walls included two other hills surrounding Jerusalem (Ps 125:2) to the south of the current Old City walls. These are the City of David and what the Byzantines and Crusaders mistakenly named “Mount Zion” because they thought King David’s tomb was located there. In fact, the book of Kings says clearly that David was buried in the City of David, where the royal necropolis can be seen today atop Hezekiah’s tunnel (all of which should be visited by the modern pilgrim). And the bogus “tomb of David” in the pseudo

"Mount Zion" of the Byzantines and Crusaders does in fact contain history. The arch behind the cenotaph is from the Little Church of Jerusalem, the first Jewish-Christian congregation in Jerusalem from the first century, and an expansion of the *domus ecclesiae* where Jesus instituted the Holy Eucharist. So, the current Upper Room (Cenacle) that pilgrims visit, while itself the refectory of a medieval monastery, is in the exact spot of the original.

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As is the case throughout the Holy Land today, there are places hallowed by tradition as well as historical biblical sites. In the former category is the Via Dolorosa, certainly worth a visit to pray the Stations of the Cross brought by the Crusaders, or at least to have coffee and apple strudel at the Austrian Hospice adjacent to station three. The historical way of the cross begins at the praetorium of Pontius Pilate's palace, built by Herod the Great, which is located at the parking lot of the Armenian Quarter between Zion and Jaffa Gates today (roughly the extent of the palace). The stone pavement mentioned in John 19:13 (excavated by Shimon Gibson) is visible outside the city wall opposite the Armenian parking lot and can be reached by exiting Jaffa Gate and walking to the left. Jesus carried his cross from this location to what is now the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, a site that at the time was outside the city walls.

The house of Caiaphas was probably in the wealthy priestly district that is now the Armenian Monastery, adjacent to Dormition Abbey (near the Upper Room). The site of St. Peter in Gallicantu, down the hill was in the earliest Byzantine tradition where St. Peter went out and wept bitterly after denying his Lord three times. Herod Antipas, who was in town for Passover, was probably staying at the Hasmonean palace in the current Jewish Quarter of the Old City, where aristocratic mansions have been excavated, including that of Kathros, a corrupt priestly family mentioned in the Talmud.

One can walk the historical way of Palm Sunday by beginning at Bethpage (Mark 11:1). On the way down, it is worth stopping at Pater Noster, a French Catholic community of nuns. Constantine built three churches: one over the Tomb of Christ, one over his birthplace in Bethlehem, and one here commemorating the ascension (Acts 1:6–11). When the latter tradition moved a block up the hill, the cave herein became associated with Jesus's teaching of the apostles in private, as he often did, and then focusing on the giving of the Lord's Prayer, which the sisters are gathering in every language on earth.

Continuing down the Mount of Olives, one comes to Dominus Flevit ("the Lord wept"), a traditional site recalling our Lord's weeping over Jerusalem (Luke

13 and 19). From the view here one can put together the events of Holy Week: Jesus came down from Bethpage to where you are standing and continued to enter the Temple Mount below. Then he returned to his home-away-from-home in Jerusalem, the house of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, in Bethany nearby. On Thursday he had arranged to celebrate Passover in the Upper Room, the tall tower now outside the city walls to the southwest near Dormition Abbey. Afterward, they came to the Garden of Gethsemane immediately below where you are standing. Arrested, he was taken to Caiaphas's house near the Upper Room tower. Then to the Praetorium on the far west side of your view of the Old City. Then sent to Herod Antipas in the Jewish Quarter district in front of you (behind the Temple Mount). Then back to the Praetorium of Pilate for sentencing and walking to the double-gray-dome of the Holy Sepulchre Church, visible just behind and to the right of the golden Dome of the Rock in front of you. Continuing down the road you began at Bethpage will bring you to the Garden of Gethsemane, the roots of whose trees may be two thousand years old. If you are privileged and honored to be a modern pilgrim, in the tradition of our three-times-per-year Jewish pilgrims from of old, pause and reflect here on what you are experiencing and *where you are*—Jerusalem.

The historic way of the cross, as near as one could walk it today on current streets, would begin at the Armenian parking lot, proceed to Jaffa Gate, turn right on David Street, then left on Christian Quarter Road. At the Mosque of Omar there is a gate, which one can imagine as the Garden Gate that at the time of Jesus led outside the city walls to the garden cemetery mentioned in the Gospels. This had been a limestone quarry that left a deep depression in the ground, with a flinty hill, good for nothing, in the center. The quarry then became a cemetery because tombs could be cut into the sides of the limestone depression. This is what Joseph of Arimathea had done. Being a rich man, his new and unused tomb contained two chambers: the first for mourners, the second with a bench upon which Jesus's shrouded body was placed. A rolling stone sealed the tomb, such as is the case in the tomb of Queen Helena of Adiabene just north of the Damascus Gate (across from St. George's Anglican Cathedral), dating to 50 CE and also in a garden cemetery. The flinty hill left by the quarriers was in the shape of a skull, so the locals called it Golgotha. The Romans appropriated it as a place of crucifixion for the most heinous of crimes, such as sedition, for which Jesus was condemned by Pontius Pilate. Pilgrims are always surprised that the Tomb of Christ is so close to Golgotha—both in one church with a dome over each—but now you understand why.

What we now call the Old City, contained within the Turkish walls, comprises four quarters. At the core of the Christian Quarter is the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, and the quarter is reached from either the Jaffa or the New Gate. Armenia was the first nation to recognize Christianity as their national religion, so they are awarded an entire quarter, entered from the Zion Gate. Adjacent is the Jewish Quarter. The Armenians and the Jews have a special affinity for each other since they each suffered a Holocaust: the Jews by the Nazis with six million lost souls and the Armenians by the Turkish genocide of one and a half million during and after World War I. The Muslim Quarter extends from the Temple Mount,

which they call Haram al-Sharif (“the Noble Sanctuary”) or simply El-Aksa after the name of the mosque located there.² Each of the quarters exhibits its own personality, descendants all of one human father, Abraham. Those of us who work for peace and justice in Jerusalem and the Holy Land believe we have all spent too many centuries focusing narrowly on Moses, Jesus, or Muhammad. While recognizing and respecting that we are different religions, isn’t it time to find our common ancestry in our common father Abraham?

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THE HISTORY OF JERUSALEM

Jerusalem is mentioned already in the Bible at Genesis 14. There it is called simply Salem, or Shalem in Hebrew. *Shalem* is related to *shalom*, which means not only peace but prosperity and security. The meaning of *Jeru-* is most likely “hill.” So, *Jeru-salem* means “secure hill,” which, being surrounded by deep valleys, it was. In Genesis 14, father Abraham goes to Jerusalem to meet Melchizedek, the king of Salem and high priest of El Elyon, “Most High God,” identical with the Lord, though Melchizedek likely did not know that. On a Trinitarian note, today we sing at the end of the Gloria in the eucharistic liturgy: “You alone are the Lord, you alone are the *Most High*, Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit, in the glory of God the Father.” It sends goose bumps to know that God revealed Godself on Mount Zion in Jerusalem to one who was not a son of Abraham centuries before God’s revelation to Moses on another holy mountain, before God walked Jerusalem’s streets in the person of Jesus Christ, and before the Holy Spirit appeared at Pentecost.

Neither Joshua nor Saul was able to take Jerusalem—“secure hill” that it was—into their possession. This was left to King David, who did so by stealth, sneaking into the water system that led from the Gihon Spring, in the Kidron Valley below the city wall, into the midst of the city itself (think Trojan horse, David style). Then, with great pomp and circumstance, he brought the ark of the covenant, which had been at his capital in Hebron for seven years, into Jerusalem. His son, Solomon, doubled the size of the city by building the temple there and extending the walls around it. Hezekiah expanded the walls further to the west in the eighth century BCE. Sadly, Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BCE. The Jews in exile lamented:

² LaMontte M. Luker, *An Illustrated Guide to the Holy Land for Tour Groups, Students, and Pilgrims* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2013), 97–100.

By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there
we hung up our harps.
For there our captors
asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”
How could we sing the Lord’s song
in a foreign land? (Ps 137:1–4)

But Jerusalem was rebuilt by Ezra and Nehemiah around 450 BCE. During the Babylonian exile, the city was part of the province of Samaria. Therefore, Ezra and Nehemiah expelled the Samaritans and would not let them participate in the rebuilding of Jerusalem, leading to the Judean-Samaritan schism obvious in the New Testament. In 167 BCE the Hellenistic Syrian king Antiochus IV, who fancied himself “Epiphanes” (the manifest god), outlawed Judaism, erected a statue of Zeus in the temple, and sacrificed a pig on the altar. Hanukkah is the celebration of the Maccabees’ liberation and rededication of the temple on Mount Zion. In 63 BCE Pompey conquered Judea and forced it into the hegemony of the Roman Empire. Frustration about this led to the first Jewish revolt of 66–70 CE, which resulted in the destruction of the temple and the expulsion of Jews from Jerusalem. The second Jewish revolt against Rome in 135 CE was similarly disastrous, ending in the total destruction of Jerusalem, which was turned by Hadrian into a Roman polis named Aelia Capitolina. His intention was to wipe out any memory that Jerusalem had ever been a Jewish city. All Jews were forced out of Judea, and they settled in Galilee, where the Mishnah and the Palestinian Talmud were produced.

The year 324 CE initiated the Byzantine period and Christian rule of the Holy Land from Constantinople, modern Istanbul. This lasted until the Muslim invasion in 638. They ruled until the Crusaders, wanting to allow Christians to visit the holy places—which practice had been forbidden by the Muslims—entered in 1099. The Crusader kingdom lasted until 1291, after which the Mamluks, non-Arab Egyptian Muslims, governed the Holy Land until the Turks took over in the sixteenth century (the time of Luther); they ruled until the end of World War I. At the conclusion of that war, England and France partitioned the Middle East into countries with Western-style borders, an imposition foreign to the tribal societies of the region. We are still living with the repercussions of this. England was given hegemony over “Palestine,” which included what we now call Israel, the West Bank, Gaza, and Jordan. England created a British-style monarchy by choosing the Hashemite family to become kings, and separated the newly formed state of Jordan under their rule from the land west of the Jordan River. This latter territory was populated by Arabs and Jews. In 1947 the United Nations voted to create two nations from this land, a Palestinian and a Jewish state. The Jews agreed but

the Arabs did not. War ensued. When the dust settled, an armistice was signed. A “green line” was drawn around biblical Judea and Samaria, and this area was given to the governance of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. King Hussein did not want to use the historical Jewish names of these territories, so it became known as the part of Jordan that lay west of the Jordan River, or “the West Bank.” Jerusalem was divided into east (Jordan) and west (Israel). After the Six-Day War of 1967, when the Arab states attacked again and, amazingly, Israel won again, Jerusalem was reunited as Israel’s capital.

OBSERVATIONS

The status of Judea and Samaria (the West Bank) remains unresolved. The Palestinian residents of the region are understandably and justifiably frustrated. In addition, 450,000 Jewish residents now live here, generally peacefully, though there have been incidents of violence. At the end of the 1980s, the Palestinian frustration boiled over into the “Intifada” (Arabic for “uprising”), generally boys throwing stones. The 1993 Oslo Accords witnessed Yasar Arafat’s return to the Holy Land and developed a plan to create a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza. The plan was proceeding on schedule until the Camp David conference hosted by President Clinton in 2000, where Arafat refused to sign the agreement. This, along with Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon’s provocative visit to the Temple Mount in September of that year, ushered in the “Second Intifada,” beginning with the terrorist takeover of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem and then fought with Palestinian suicide bombers. Apart from the Jewish families who witnessed their loved ones being blown up, the Palestinian Christians are some of the biggest losers in all this. A priest in Nablus told me, “We are being crushed in a vice between the Muslims and the Jews.” I pray every day for the Christians of the Holy Land, and I hope you will too.

By 2005 peace returned, but not without the five years of suffering by Jewish families and the Palestinians of the West Bank. Israel found it necessary to re-occupy the territories that had been handed over to the Palestinian Authority and to build a security wall in certain areas, such as the border with Bethlehem. This causes great hardship for the Christians and Muslims of Bethlehem, but has, along with security checkpoints, stopped the suicide bombers. We pray for the day, which I am sure will dawn, when it will come down.

Most of us who live here, and those abroad who work for peace and justice, think the opportunity for a two-state solution (Israel and Palestine) has passed. The world has changed, with Hamas in charge in Gaza, Hezbollah a major player in Lebanon, and the Islamic State hibernating in Syria and Iraq. We await the emergence of a new paradigm, perhaps one state with equal rights and the integrity of cultural heritage for all its citizens.

What are my observations having studied, worked, and lived here in the Holy Land for over forty years? I am hopeful. In 1992, while on sabbatical at the conclusion of the first Intifada, I was shopping in Arab east Jerusalem and had an ice

ball thrown at my upper back—clearly an act of hatred and frustration. Now I live in that neighborhood. It is a peaceful and happy mixed neighborhood where Jews shop and attend synagogue and Arabs, the majority population, raise their families and attend church and mosque. We all hear the Jewish horn blown on Friday evenings signaling the beginning of Shabbat (Sabbath), the Muslim call to prayer five times a day, and church bells morning and evening calling Christians to Masses and services. I believe this is a microcosm of what will come about in the whole country eventually. Last week in the building where I live there was a two-day conference comprising Arabs and Jews; it was entitled “Seeking Common Ground.” I believe the will of Palestinians to raise their families in peace, go to school, have medical care, and live in prosperity will triumph where politics have failed in the past. This is the definition of shalom. As mentioned earlier, the Hebrew word means not only peace but prosperity, well-being, and equity for all. It is one of the three elements of the kingdom of God: justice, righteousness, and shalom. May it be so. Pray it will be so. It will be so.

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let my right hand wither!
Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth,
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem
above my highest joy . . .
Pray for the peace of Jerusalem. . . .
May the Lord . . . bless you from Zion! (Ps 137:5–6; 122:6; 134:3) ⊕

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