

Jerusalem as a Christian Sacrament

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In this article I argue that all Christian traditions understand Jerusalem as a sacramental place because of its ability to serve as an instrument of God's grace. But I want to go even further and maintain that those who write about the value of a pilgrimage to Jerusalem for a Christian tend to do so in the language usually reserved for the great sacraments. Therefore, a community's explanation of why Jerusalem is a sacrament will differ depending upon whether they are Orthodox, Catholic or Protestant, and their justification of the pilgrimage will reflect the way their tradition understands and explains the great sacraments. Also, regarding the three aspects of pilgrimage (exegetical, tactile, and ritualistic), the three traditions will each put an emphasis on a particular aspect; so the Roman Catholics emphasize ritual, the Orthodox the tactile, and the Protestants the exegetical.

The Evolution of Pilgrimage to Jerusalem

Following the physical ascension of Jesus and His great commission to go into the world baptizing all nations in the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit, it appears that the special connection between Jerusalem and God is severed. When the temple is destroyed in 70 AD and then the city itself in 132–35 AD this seems to be a final confirmation that the place where Abraham sacrificed Isaac, David established the Tabernacle, and Solomon built the Temple is no longer God's special home. The gospel story of the renting of the Temple Vail symbolizes this transformation within Christian thinking. Now Christ's sacrifice on the

cross substitutes for the temple sacrifices and Christ's sacrifice can be made present anywhere the Eucharist is celebrated. Christ is now to be found not only in Jerusalem or Bethlehem or Nazareth but wherever two or three are gathered in His name. Now Jesus is present through the scriptures and the breaking of bread as a spiritual but real presence that is not tied down to a particular geographic location. Christ, and therefore Christianity, is freed from its homeland and becomes simultaneously at home everywhere and nowhere.

But as the eschatological expectations of the early Christians recedes into an indefinite future, the Christian story as presented in scripture becomes an increasingly important means of "knowing" the Lord. Therefore, the need to correctly interpret the complex layers of that story becomes a major concern. This desire to more completely understand scripture recruits many skills for the task – literary, philosophic, and linguistic. It is only logical that one tool of interpretation to be used would be a visit to those places where the story took place in order to gain a clearer understanding of the text. As a result, one of the earliest types of journeys to Jerusalem by Christians for Christian purposes is the exegetical tour such as that taken by Origen or Melito of Sardis in the second century. So the first type of Christian pilgrimage seems to be the exegetical.

However, if the scholarly tour of the biblical sites is an attraction to the literary minded, most Christian believers in the ancient world were more interested in the sanctity bestowed upon a place by the glorious death of the martyrs. Around the graves of the martyrs, churches grew and communities felt empowered by the physical presence of the remains of saints. These were places of grace and that grace could be acquired by a visit and especially by touch. What has been called a tactile piety arose around these saints and their tombs. Constantine's conversion and the establishment of the Constantinian Holy Sites in Jerusalem and Bethlehem meant these same acts of tactile piety could be engaged in at the very sites of Jesus' birth, crucifixion, and resurrection. If a saint's remains could bestow grace how much more potentially potent were the locations of the life of Jesus Himself. So to the exegetical type of pilgrimage must be added the tactile type.

By the visit of Egeria in the 380s AD, the exegetical and the tactile pilgrimages were conjoined so that at the various holy sites the appropriate scriptural passages were read as well as the opportunity of touching the "very spot" where a sacred event had occurred and accessing the power of grace it contained. Once Egeria was in Jerusalem, however, this pattern was given even greater structure by ritually reenacting the gospel events so that the visitor/pilgrim came to be an actual participant in the divine story. By doing this the scriptures were illuminated, the grace of the holy places acquired, and the presence of Christ "realized" – made present again or re-presented. It seems that this dramatic representational ritualism was constructed under the influence of Cyril of Jerusalem (d. 389 AD) "who devised a series of services, particularly for Holy Week, closely linked with the topography of the city where he presided as bishop."¹ This represents the development of a third type of pilgrimage, the ritualistic.

By the end of the fourth century, exegetical, tactile, and ritualistic pilgrimages had evolved and become, as in the case of Egeria, interconnected.

The Pilgrimage Theology of the Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant Traditions

While each pilgrim comes to Jerusalem with their own spiritual needs and expectations these are most often shaped by their own religious and cultural traditions. It is not strange, therefore, that the three major Christian denominational groups – Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant – would approach and view the pilgrimage enterprise in different ways. It is, however, my contention that these differences are primarily based upon their particular ways of understanding the sacraments. Also that each theological tradition will tend to emphasize one of the three major types of pilgrimage: the Orthodox the tactile; the Roman Catholics the ritualistic; and the Protestants the exegetical. This is not to claim that the other types of pilgrimage are not present, only that one type tends to dominate.

Orthodox Pilgrimage

The Orthodox emphasis upon the tactile component of pilgrimage arises from their belief that because it was at particular sites in Jerusalem that the Incarnate God was born, lived, died, and was resurrected these sites are themselves witnesses of the events and display the divine mystery to those who approach in faith. The holy sites are icons of the divine mysteries and, like all icons, are windows on the truth that lies behind them and doors into God's grace that can be attained by pious prayers, touches, and kisses. Like the icons, however, the Church is responsible for shaping them so that their divine element is evident. Therefore, it is entirely appropriate for the tomb of Christ to become an "icon encrusted shrine," or Calvary to be covered with pious pictures and precious metals with only a hole to give access to the actual stone of Golgotha.

The Orthodox view of the Holy Sepulchre is expressed in this quote from Gary Vikan on the Byzantine perspective:

The Sepulchre itself [forms] a "living icon" of the Resurrection. For like an icon, they the [worshippers] by virtue of the iconographic verisimilitude, collectively joined that chain of imparted sanctity leading back to their archetype, to the biblical event itself. And in doing so they accomplished what Theodore the Studite said all artificial images achieved: "Every artificial image . . . exhibits in itself, by way of imitation, the form of its model . . ." Thus these pilgrims did not merely touch the locus sanctus, they became, at least briefly, iconically one and the same with it, and with that sacred event which had made it holy.²

The sacramental theology that lies behind this view of the holy sites as well as the icons of Orthodoxy is the same as the Divine Liturgy – it brings heaven down to earth, the divine to the human, the transcendent to the immanent, and immortality to the mortal. The liturgy, the icons, and the holy places are not only windows into eternity,

but doors as well because one can pass over the threshold, and what one sees can also be participated in. That which is represented and symbolized is also, to the faithful, available because it is re-presented, made present.

It is this effectual nature of the holy sites as channels of grace that explains the desire of the Orthodox pilgrims to go to Jerusalem. They want to participate in the celebration and re-presentation of that victory over death on the very site where it happened, so that the victory can be theirs as well. This victory over death is what the Orthodox seek in all the sacraments – to be brought into the divine, eternal, heavenly Jerusalem. A journey to the earthly Jerusalem is therefore one of the sacramental doors into that heavenly Jerusalem, where one is freed from death and sin.

For the Orthodox, therefore, the Holy Land and Jerusalem in particular is sacramental because it was at these sites that the Incarnate God lived, preached, died, and was resurrected. These sites are witness to these events and are able to display the divine mystery; they become icons for viewing the holy mysteries and are also points of access to the grace of God.

Roman Catholic View of Pilgrimage

For Roman Catholics the primary way of speaking of Jerusalem from the Middle Ages up to the recent past is in terms of the plenary indulgences offered to those who journey there in faith and partake in the various rites performed at the Holy Sites. At first glance this might seem to make the Jerusalem pilgrimage a subset of penance. But the power of the place to awaken the hardened heart, to provide succor to those in grief, to grant an assurance of forgiveness to those alienated from God by sin, to return the pilgrim to the state of the newly baptized, to make Christ present in hearts and lives, to inspire the clergy with the sacredness of their vocation, and prepare the soul for death meant that Jerusalem was viewed as almost an all inclusive sacrament, intensifying and/or renewing the sacramental grace of the others.

The tendency in Roman Catholic sacramental theology from the early years was to adopt the

instrumental view which considered the liturgical acts as means used by God, acting through the mediation of the ordained minister, to give grace to people. In this perspective Christians come to the liturgy to receive sacraments, to be freed from their sins, to be blessed. This receptive approach to the role of the faithful coincided with the increasing exclusion from active participation in sacramental liturgy.³

When by the twelfth century attempts are made to define sacraments even more precisely there was a problem of fitting them all into one category. The one common element seemed to be the liturgical ceremony. So that ceremony “by itself was identified as the sacrament, and the focus of understanding Christian sacramentality became more limited.”⁴

This would help explain the importance in Roman Catholic pilgrimages of ritualistic

acts performed at the Holy Sites usually by ordained priests. This is evidenced by the predominance of Roman Catholics who liturgically walk the Stations of the Cross with clerical leaders or the crowds who follow the Franciscans in their peripatetic prayers through the Holy Sepulchre. The format of these rituals tend to be a biblical reading which mentions the site, prayers which express the theological significance of what occurred at the site, followed by common prayers or antiphonal prayers which ask God's blessing on those present that they might be transformed by appropriating the loving God revealed in the acts that took place on this spot.

Post-Vatican II sacramental theology has begun to reevaluate the "instrumental view" and allows the sacraments to be seen in a more inclusive, multifaceted way. Increasingly the emphasis is upon the ecclesial community created and nurtured by the sacraments. Again a Jerusalem pilgrimage fits the criterion since creating a sense of Christian identity and commitment is one of the most obvious results of a faithful pilgrimage, especially if done in conjunction with members of the same ecclesial group.

The Protestant View of Pilgrimage

The Holy Land and Jerusalem as a sacrament is a concept held by many Protestant pilgrims. At first glance this may seem to be an odd designation for these Protestants to use but it is quickly evident that it is a very Protestant understanding of sacramentality.

For Protestants the primal sacrament is the Word of God. In Jesus we encounter the Word of God made flesh and in the Bible we encounter the Word of God in narrative form transformed into an encounter with Christ Himself through faith. In Jerusalem the ability of the land, the places, to make the biblical narrative come alive and represent the story of Jesus gives it the power to transmit the narrative of the Bible and therefore be a source of encountering the Word Himself – the living, resurrected Christ – through faith. The Protestant sacramentality is to either see it as an effectual memorial of God's loving regard for the world (Zwingli, d. 1531) or to see it as a representing to the faithful the spirit of Christ (Calvin). Jerusalem can and does do both in the eyes of the Protestant pilgrims. It is in this sense that Protestant pilgrimages are primarily exegetical.

Because the Protestants are mainly interested in pilgrimage events which enlighten them about the Bible – its history, customs, geography – they often find the traditional sites too altered (they would often say polluted) from their original appearance and therefore less able to serve their purpose to imaginatively bring them into the world of the Bible. So they prefer the Garden Tomb, discovered by General Gordon, to the Holy Sepulchre, the Mount of Olives to Golgatha.

The Jesus of the land rather than the sites was of the essence to these Protestant pilgrims, as their accounts and even the titles of their books proclaimed. The "land" seemed to serve for them two interconnected theological functions. First, in a very important and also very Protestant way, it was a sacrament, and second, it was a way of responding to the growing apprehension among the English literary classes that the Bible might not be historically true.

This Protestant idea of the Holy Land as a sacrament is an idea mentioned by John Kelman in his book *The Holy Land*:

A journey through the Holy Land may reasonably be in some sort a sacramental event in a man's life. Spiritual things are very near us, and we feel that we have a heritage in them; yet they constantly elude us, and need help from the senses to make them real and commanding. Such sacramental help must surely be given by anything that brings vividly to our realization those scenes and that life in the midst of which the Word was made flesh. The more clearly we can gain the impression of places and events in Syria, the more reasonable and convincing will Christian faith become.⁵

Later he explicates this thought more closely:

The sacramental quality of the Holy Land is of course felt most by those who seek especially for memoirs and realizations of Jesus Christ. Within the pale of Christianity there are several different ways of regarding the land as holy, and most of them lead to disappointment. The Greek and Roman Catholic churches vie with one another in their passion for sites and relics there, and seem to lose all sense of the distinction between sublime and grotesque in their eagerness for identifications. A Protestant counterpart to this mistaken zeal is that of the huntsman of the fields of prophecy . . . [those who try and read the signs of the end times]. Apart from either of these are others less orthodox but equally superstitious who have some vague notion of occult and magic qualities which differentiate this from other regions of the world . . . It is wiser to abandon the attempt at forcing the supernatural to reveal itself, and to turn to the human side of things as the surest way of ultimately arriving at the divine.⁶

For this Protestant perspective the proper understanding of the sacrament is to understand its power to bring the Bible and its stories and characters alive, a dramatic way of impressing them more vividly on the memory and the imagination. In this sense the Holy Land is not just illustrative but makes Jesus and the Bible real in the same way that Jesus is real in the Lord's Supper – a memory that re-presents Him to those who participate in faith. For most Protestant commentators on the Holy Land, this concept of the relationship to the land is related more to the sacramental theology of Calvin than to that of Zwingli. The re-presentation is more than just a memory (Zwingli); indeed it is a making of Jesus present once again, albeit in a spiritual manner (Calvin). Another phrase used to express this same idea is that the Holy Land is a fifth gospel or another Bible. J.M.P. Otts, an American but with an attitude very representative of the English Protestants, says of his book:

This is not a “book of travels,” though it never could have been written if the author had not travelled in Palestine; for it is the result of the careful reading of the Gospels in the lights and shades of the land where Jesus lived and taught. When so read it is found that the land of Jesus so harmonizes with the four written Gospels, and so unfolds and enlarges their meaning, that it forms around them a Fifth Gospel.⁷

Otts drew the term from the nineteenth century French biblical scholar Renan’s use of it in his *Life of Jesus*, but he gave it a very different meaning because, whereas Renan saw the Bible as a human story mistakenly made divine, Otts saw the Bible as a divine story made human and therefore fundamentally sacramental. Tweedie reiterates the common Protestant theme that the Holy Land can make Jesus come alive in the hearts and imaginations of those who approach in faith: “A visit to the Land of Promise, so long the land of grief and oppressions, furnishes a thousand proofs and confirmations of the Bible. It is indeed a second Bible, all responsive to the first.”⁸

To the extent that the Bible stands at the center of the Protestant faith as the primary vehicle of God’s communication to His people, then the Holy Land as a revealer of the Bible and its meaning is itself a form of revelation, making it a channel of grace – a sacrament. Not everyone can travel to the Holy Land, of course, and it is not necessary, in fact, because those who do so can communicate and preserve their experiences (just as the original disciples did) through books about the Holy Land and, eventually, photographic essays. Hence the plethora of Holy Land books produced in English in the nineteenth century. These testimonies allowed others to come to know the Jesus whom the Holy Land proclaims but whose true domain is in the hearts of believers.

Conclusion

Although the various Christian communities justify the sacramental nature of Jerusalem differently, and although each tradition is uncomfortable (although to different extents) with making a pilgrimage to Jerusalem seem obligatory, as the Haj in Islam, nevertheless the experience of many Christian pilgrims to Jerusalem – no matter what their denomination or theological orientation – is so transformative that they cannot describe it except in the terms of a sacrament. And so Jerusalem is both an historical site but also an access point to the heavenly Jerusalem where one can encounter Christ and therefore God, where God’s Kingdom has come eschatologically through faith.

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Endnotes

- 1 John Gordon Davies, *Pilgrimage Yesterday and Today: Why? Where? How?* (London: SCM Press, 1988).
- 2 Gary Vikan, "Pilgrims in Magi Clothing: The Impact of Memesis on Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Art," in *The Blessing of Pilgrimage*, ed. Robert Ousterhout (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1990).
- 3 Bernard Cooke, *Sacraments & Sacramentality* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1994); Peter Fink, S.J., ed., *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990).
- 4 Cooke, *Sacraments*, 118.
- 5 John Kelman, *The Holy Land* (London: A. & C. Black, 1909), 3.
- 6 Kelman, *The Holy Land*, 5–6.
- 7 John Martin Philip Otts, *The Fifth Gospel: The Land Where Jesus Lived* (Chicago: Revell, c.1892), 5.
- 8 Reverend W. K. Tweedie, *Jerusalem and its Environs* (London: T. Nelson and Sons, 1873), 102.