CITY of the GREAT KING

Jerusalem from David to the Present

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Every year thousands of Christians make the journey to Jerusalem and the Holy Land to visit the sites of biblical history or the “holy places” associated with the life of Jesus: Bethlehem, Nazareth, the Church of the Resurrection, the Mount of Olives. Most of these visitors are pilgrims, not tourists. Unlike tourists, they carry not archaeological guides but Bibles and prayer books; they come not to be instructed but to pray. Recently I saw a group of Italian pilgrims visiting the shrine of the Visitation, where Mary, pregnant with Jesus, visited Elizabeth, who was pregnant with John (Luke 1:39–56) in Ein Karem, a tiny village south west of Jerusalem. As I passed by they were reciting the Hail Mary.

There is no command in the Christian Bible that Christians make pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Yet from the third century at least, Christians began to make the journey to Jerusalem “for prayer and investigation of the places” (Eusebius, h.e. 6.11.2). But it was not until the uncovering of the tomb of Christ in the fourth century and the construction of churches at the holy places that pilgrimage to the Holy Land began in earnest. By the end of the fourth century the practice was so widespread that some Christian leaders reminded the faithful that Christ had not commanded pilgrimage and that God was no less present in other parts of the world.1

Like other religious people, Christians were not exempt from the lure of holy places. Once pilgrimage emerged as a form of devotion among Christians, it became an enduring feature of Christian piety.
In the early Middle Ages when Muslims first observed Christians journeying to Christian sites under Muslim hegemony, it appeared to them that the command to make pilgrimage was a directive of Christian law. “Many times I have seen people coming here [Syria] . . . from those parts of the world [the west]. They mean no harm. All they want to do is to fulfill their law” (emphasis mine).2

A consideration of the early evidence of pilgrimage can help us understand how and why pilgrimage, though not commanded of Christians in the Bible, came to play such a preeminent role in Christian piety.3 Certain features of Christian tradition appear inimical to the sacralization of space that is the mark of the piety of pilgrims. One of the most famous sayings of Jesus are his words to the Samaritan woman at the well. “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the father . . . God is spirit, and those who worship him worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:21–24). John Calvin, the reformer, called pilgrimage a form of “counterfeit worship.”4 Yet pilgrimage has outlasted its critics.

Pilgrimage in Antiquity

In antiquity pilgrims were a familiar sight.5 At shrines and cult centers throughout the Mediterranean world they could be seen bringing their offerings, joining in sacrifices, fulfilling vows made in times of distress, seeking relief from pain or healing, giving thanks for benefits, participating in processions and banquets. At least two hundred sacred shrines were dedicated to the healing god Asclepius. His chief pilgrimage centers, Epidaurus and Pergamon, were not unlike a sanatorium or spa where the infirm went to bathe, to drink mineral water, and to place themselves under the care of a physician. Often these centers included temples, fountains, and baths, as well as a gymnasion, theater, hostel for pilgrims, rooms for incubation. Visitors would stay for several days, sometimes for weeks.

At these and other well-known shrines—for example, Hierapolis in Syria, Delphi in Greece, the island of Philae in Egypt—pilgrims could be seen from all over the Mediterranean world. To Hierapolis, the cult center of the goddess of Syria, came people from Phoenicia, Babylonia, Cappadocia, and Cilicia, says Lucian.6 He described the
ritual of a pilgrim who was setting out to the shrine of the goddess of Syria at Hierapolis as follows:

Whenever someone is about to go to the Holy City, he shaves his head and his eyebrows. Then after sacrificing a sheep, he carves it in pieces and dines on it. The fleece, however, he lays on the ground to kneel on, and the feet and the head of the animal he puts on his own head. As he prays he asks that the present sacrifice be accepted and promises a greater one the next time. When he has finished, he puts a garland on his head and on the heads of those who are making the same pilgrimage. Then he sets out from his own country to make the journey, using cold water both for bathing as well as drinking, and he always sleeps on the ground, for it is a sacrilege for him to touch a bed before he completes the journey and returns to his own country.7

For this pilgrim, the journey to Hierapolis required that he leave his home city and country to travel to another place. There were temples closer to home, but “none was greater than that in the holy city” of Hierapolis, for it was there that the gods are “readily manifest to the inhabitants.”8 Pilgrimage was rooted in a fundamental religious fact: the gods appeared at particular places and locales. In a way that is difficult for moderns to grasp, religion in the ancient world was wedded to place, as Walter Burkert reminds us: “The cult of the Greeks is almost always defined locally; the places of worship are fixed in ancient tradition and cannot be moved lightly.”9 Unlike the sacred space defined by a synagogue or a church or mosque, that is, religious space that was “chosen” or created by the construction of a building, the sacredness of a mountain or a grove or a cave was “discovered” or found. Its sacrality was given, and the building of an altar or a temple simply marked the location.10

Holy places not only drew people to them to pray, to fulfill a vow, to offer sacrifices, or to seek healing, but also provided a point of orientation, an axis or fulcrum, a center around which other points are located. At the shrine at Delphi, the pilgrim could view a smooth rounded stone, the omphalos, the navel of the world. Likewise at Claros, the site of an oracle in Asia Minor, there was a room in which had been placed a stone of deep blue marble. Around it were placed
stone benches, and as the pilgrims stared at it they seemed to be sitting at the center of the earth. These sacred places created a zone or precinct extending out beyond the shrine itself. This land of Epidauros was “sacred to Asclepius,” wrote Pausanias, the Greek geographer, and the “sacred grove of Asclepius was surrounded on all sides by boundary marks.”11 No death or birth was allowed to take place within the enclosure, and all offerings had to be consumed within its bounds. Usually only one entrance was allowed, and in some cases it was marked by a ceremonial gate that set apart the sacred territory from the common or profane space that surrounded it. In most cases the zone was limited to the immediate vicinity, a grove or a temple precinct, but in places it was extended to include a town or city, or even a group of villages in the surrounding region.12

At the pilgrimage shrines, piety was nurtured not only by seeing and touching, by the proximity to holy places and holy things, but also by history, myth, and memory. “I will relate,” writes Lucian, “the stories that are told about the ‘holy place’ and how the temple was built.”13 At the shrines could be found guides or “hosts”14 whose task it was to recount the stories and myths associated with the site, to point out significant details, and to explain their meaning to the pilgrims and visitors.15 In his Description of Greece, Pausanias, the geographer and traveler, provides many examples of the stories that were told at the pilgrimage centers, as well as at other sites of historical interest.16 In antiquity, no less than today, pilgrimage and tourism existed side by side, and for much the same reasons. Without memory, without historical (or mythical) associations, trees and stones and rivers and temples are dormant and inert.

**Early Jewish Pilgrimage**

For the Jew, pilgrimage centered on Jerusalem, the city that stood “in the center of the nations” (Ezekiel 53). In ancient Israel there had been other pilgrimage sites—Shiloh, for example, the setting for an annual pilgrimage—but in the period of the Second Commonwealth, when the Temple was standing, Jerusalem was the chief goal of Jewish pilgrims. “Three times a year shall all thy males appear before the Lord thy God at the place which he will choose [Jerusalem]; on the feast of unleavened bread, and on the feast of weeks, and at the feast of
tabernacles” (Deuteronomy 16:16). Besides these pilgrimage festivals, pious Israelites traveled to the city to fulfill other ritual obligations, for example, marking the birth of a child.

Pilgrimage to Jerusalem was a communal undertaking, a joyous and happy occasion as people from the same town or village traveled to the Holy City in company with fellow Jews.17 The historian Josephus says it fostered “mutual affection” among Jews: “For it is good that they should not be ignorant of one another, being members of the same race and partners in the same institutions.”18 Anthropologists have observed that the journey to the holy place and fellowship with other pilgrims is as important as the goal.19 Often pilgrims would remain in Jerusalem for weeks and months, and hostels were built for that purpose. During their stay in the Holy City, they not only offered sacrifices in the Temple but they also fulfilled other ritual obligations, such as purification, and during their stay some engaged in study of the Torah. An inscription found on a building in Jerusalem reads: “For the reading of the Torah and the study of the commandments, and the hostel and the rooms and the water installations, for needy travelers from foreign lands.”20 Pilgrimage was much more than a visit to holy places; it was an occasion to renew friendship, to study, to forge and strengthen bonds of loyalty to Jerusalem and the Land of Israel.

With the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, the ancient laws on pilgrimage could no longer be observed. Pilgrimage for the Jew had been a ritual act whose purpose was to offer prescribed sacrifices in the Holy City. The loss of the Temple, and the occupation of the city by non-Jews, did not, however, put a stop to pilgrimage. Though the traditional ritual obligations could no longer be fulfilled, Jews continued to return to the city. At first they may have continued to observe those laws that still seemed applicable, for example, the offering of the second tithe, the Maaser Sheni. This was an offering of produce that was supposed to be eaten in Jerusalem or “redeemed” by putting aside coins of the same value. For a time this practice was continued by Jews living in the vicinity of Jerusalem.

Later, Jews came to Jerusalem, or at least to the outskirts of the city, for another reason: to mourn the destruction of the Temple. This practice, visible even today at the Western Wall (the remains of the Second Temple platform from the time of Herod), had its origins in the generations after the Bar Kochba revolt. Attested by Christian as

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well as Jewish sources from the Roman and Byzantine periods, it became the most visible expression of Jewish devotion to the fallen city. A description of the practice is found in the works of Jerome, the fourth-century Christian scholar, who lived in Bethlehem. He often had occasion to view, in his words, the “pitiful crowd” of Jews who came each year on the Ninth of Ab, the anniversary of the destruction of Jerusalem, to mourn the lost city. When they reached the summit of the Mount of Olives they waited and lamented as they gazed at the ruins of the Temple and remembered its altar.  

This lugubrious band of pilgrims presents quite another face when the observer is a Jew. To the Jews, they were not a pitiful mob but a company of the pious engaged in a purposeful religious act with its own ceremony and formalities. Mourning the destruction of the Temple was not simply the by-product of an occasional journey to Jerusalem; it was becoming a regular practice. A text from the Cairo Genizah, a storeroom in the Cairo synagogue, discovered early in this century, describes the ritual to be observed on arriving in sight of the Holy City:

If you are worthy to go up to Jerusalem, when you look at the city from Mount Scopus [you should observe the following procedure]. If you are riding on a donkey step down; if you are on foot, take off your sandals, then rending your garment say: “This [our] sanctuary was destroyed” . . . When you arrive in the city continue to rend your garments for the temple and the people and the house of Israel. Then pray saying: “May the Lord our God be exalted” and “Let us worship at his footstool . . . We give you thanks, O Lord our God, that you have given us life, brought us to this point, and made us worthy to enter your house” . . . Then return and circle all the gates of the city and go round all its corners, make a circuit and count its towers.

From these fragments in the Cairo Genizah as well as several passages in the Talmud, it is apparent that pilgrimage to the fallen city had become a distinct ritual. The rabbis debated, for example, what specific rites one should perform, and at what places. Should one rend one’s garments when one actually sees the Holy City or not until one is able to see the ruins of the Temple? Some said that there were two distinct “rendings,” one for the city and a second for the Temple. “As soon as one reaches Mount Scopus he rends. Does he rend for the
Holy Temple separately and for Jerusalem separately? The former ruling [he rends for the Holy Temple] obtains where one first encounters the site of the sanctuary and the latter [he enlarges it for Jerusalem] where one first encounters Jerusalem. The rabbis, ever practical, even discussed how one repairs the garment that has been rent.123

Jews also venerated places that marked the sites of significant events in the life of the people. An early example within the Scriptures is the account in the Book of Joshua of the fording of the Jordan River by the Israelites before the conquest of Canaan. After the Israelites had passed through the river to dry ground and were safely on its opposite bank, Joshua ordered representatives of the twelve tribes to take stones out of the river and construct a monument in the river and in Gilgal, the place where the Israelites camped after crossing the Jordan. These stones were to be a "sign" to the people, a "memorial" so that when "in time to come" their children asked: "What do these stones mean?" their parents could tell them that here God cut off the waters of the river before the Ark of the Covenant. "So these stones shall be to the people of Israel a memorial for ever" (Joshua 4:4-7).

According to the book of Joshua, a cairn marked the place where God had performed this marvelous deed on behalf of his people. At a later period in Jewish history, places where God had intervened in history were remembered with special prayers and blessings. In the treatise on blessings (m. Berakoth 9.1) in the Mishnah, the question arose as to where and when one should speak a blessing. "If one sees a place where miracles have been wrought for Israel, he should say, blessed be He who wrought miracles for our ancestors in this place."

In the discussion of this passage in the Talmud, the rabbis distinguished blessings that were incumbent on the people of Israel as a whole and blessings that were spoken only by individuals. If, for example, someone were attacked by a lion or a wild camel and were "miraculously saved," whenever that person passed that place again he was to say: "Blessed be He who wrought for me a miracle in this place." Because the deliverance concerned only an individual, only the person for whom the miracle was done was required to say a blessing.

The other type of blessing applied to all Israel. "If one sees the place of the crossing of the Red Sea, or the fords of the Jordan, . . . or the stone which Og king of Bashan wanted to throw at Israel . . . or the pillar of salt of Lot's wife, or the place where the wall of Jericho

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sank into the ground, for all these one should give thanksgiving and praise to the Almighty” (b. Berakoth 54a). These miracles God had done for Israel, and they were to be remembered with a blessing by any Jew when he or she viewed the place where the miracle took place.

Whether the deliverance was individual or corporate, the holiness of the place was “created” by the event that happened there; unlike a sacred grove, it was not “discovered.” At such places, the appropriate ritual action was not only prayer or vows or petitions for healing; the place required retelling the story of what happened there. In reciting the story, however, the pilgrim did not simply recall what happened to others in the past; the prayer acknowledged God’s mercy in the present. By the ritual act of offering a blessing, blowing a ram’s horn at Rosh Hashannah, or eating bitter herbs at Pesach, faithful Jews made the past part of their own present. Invoking God’s marvelous deeds at the very place where the events had taken place intensified and heightened the sense of participation in the marvelous deeds of old.

In the Footsteps of Jesus

Marcel Proust wrote, “The past is hidden in some material object (in the sensation which that material object will give us) which we do not suspect.” Memory is linked inescapably to tangible things that can been seen (or tasted or smelled), and it was to recollect and remember that Christians first set out “to trace the footsteps of Jesus,” in the words of Origen. It is, however, misleading, indeed anachronistic, to call Origen a pilgrim, if by pilgrim one means someone who prays or engages in a ritual at a holy place. Origen’s interest was as much historical and exegetical as it was religious. Several generations earlier, another Christian thinker, a bishop from western Asia Minor, Melito of Sardis, had made a journey to the “east,” presumably Palestine, to the “place where these things had been proclaimed and accomplished.” His purpose in going there was to obtain “precise information” about the books of the “Old Testament.” He wanted to know the number as well as the order of the books that Christians shared with the Jews. Like Origen, he was interested in Palestine because it was the land of the Bible and it could provide information that was not available elsewhere.
Already in the third century, pilgrims had begun to visit Palestine “for prayer” and “investigation of the holy places.” But we have no firsthand account of an actual journey until the fourth century. This is the *Itinerarium Burgidale*, the record of a Latin-speaking “pilgrim” from Bordeaux in Gaul, who arrived in the East in 333, four years before the death of Constantine. He made the long and arduous journey to Palestine by land, passing through northern Italy, down the coast of modern Yugoslavia, across northern Greece and Macedonia, south to the Bosporus, which he crossed at Chalcedon, traveling across the spine of Asia Minor to Ancyra, then through the Taurus Mountains to Tarsus, finally reaching Antioch in Syria. From there he traveled along the coast through Laodicea, Beirut, and Sidon to Palestine.

The record of this anonymous pilgrim’s journey is a brief, almost stenographic account, noting where he went, what he saw, where he changed horses, distances from one place to another. His pilgrimage took him all over Palestine, not simply to Jerusalem and the scenes of Jesus’ life but also to obscure places, sometimes where little-known biblical events had taken place. His comments take this form: “Mount Carmel is there. There Elijah did his sacrifice.” “City of Jezreel; it was there that King Ahab lived and Elijah prophesied; there also is the plain where David killed Goliath.” “A mile from there is the place called Sychar, where the Samaritan woman went down to draw water, at the very place where Jacob dug the well, and our Lord Jesus Christ spoke with her.”

Jerusalem is presented in the same terse style. The pilgrim from Bordeaux mentions the pools built by Solomon; the pools of Bethesda; the place on the Temple Mount where the Lord was tempted; the site of the Temple; the statues of Hadrian; the column where Christ was scourged; Mount Zion, where, according to his report, seven synagogues stood; Golgotha, “where the Lord was crucified and about a stone’s throw from it the vault where they laid his body and he rose again on the third day.” Here, he observes, without further comment, the emperor had built a “basilica,” a “place for the Lord.” He also mentions the new basilicas constructed on the Mount of Olives and at Bethlehem and also the basilica at Mamre, which he says was “exceptionally beautiful.” He went to Jericho and saw the tree Zacchaeus climbed to see Christ, the spring of the prophet Elisha, the
Figure 9. Illustrated in Mainz (983-991), this *maiestas* from a royal prayer book in Pommersfelden shows the figure of Christ in a cípeus shaped by concentric lines, with two angels. (See Chapter 13.)
house of Rahab the harlot, the spot where the Israelites placed the
twelve stones, the place in the Jordan where the Lord was baptized
by John.

It is tempting to smile at this pilgrim’s credulity. The house of
Rahab standing in Jericho 1,500 years later! Zaccheus’s tree 300 years
old! Pilgrims were shown the water pots used at the wedding of Cana,
and in Arabia they could see the dung hill on which Job sat. Yet even
modern pilgrims are shown “Jacob’s well” and the inn used by the
good Samaritan on the road to Jericho. Like pilgrims of old, they
often make the same circuit that this pious pilgrim traced, peering
curiously at the scenes of biblical history to evoke images of the
mighty heroes of ancient times. There is more here than credulity;
these sights were narrow beams of light that penetrated the soul. In
the aphorism of Cynthia Ozick: “A visitor passes through a place; the
place passes through the pilgrim.”

What stands out in the account of the pilgrim from Bordeaux is
not his credulity but his juxtaposing of minor biblical events and the
places of the central “mysteries” of the Christian faith. The book
exhibits almost no “theological” interest. It moves indiscriminately
from one place to another. When he came to the Mount of Olives he
wrote: “On the left is a vineyard where is also the rock where Judas
Iscariot betrayed Christ; and on the right is the palm-tree from which
the children took branches and strewed them in Christ’s path. Nearby,
about a stone’s throw away, are two memorial tombs of beautiful
workmanship. One of them, formed from a single rock, is where the
prophet Isiah was laid, and in the other lies Hezekiah, king of the
Jews.” The pilgrim of Bordeaux has no hierarchy of place. If a site
is mentioned in the Bible, and it can be located, it is worthy of a visit.

Patterns of Pilgrimage

A much fuller account of pilgrimage to Palestine was written by an
aristocratic woman from Spain named Egeria. By the time Egeria
visited the land in the late fourth century, Jerusalem was a bustling
Christian city, filled with pilgrims, monks and nuns, clerics and adven-
turers. Its new monuments at the holy places dazzled pilgrims from
all over the world, and the elaborate liturgies celebrated in the chief
churches thrilled visitors. Nevertheless, her pilgrimage, like that of the
pilgrim of Bordeaux, was as much a quest to satisfy her own intense curiosity about the land of the Bible as it was to worship at the holy places in Jerusalem and elsewhere. “You know how inquisitive I am,” she wrote of her visit to the valley of Cherith (1 Kings 17:3–6). She wanted to know from the monk who lived there why he had built his cell in that place (Itinerarium Egeriae 16.3).

Egeria wished to see with her own eyes the places where the great events of biblical history took place. She visited the “holy mount of God,” Mount Sinai, deep in the desert and difficult of access even today; Mount Horeb, where the prophet Elijah fled from the presence of King Ahab; the land of Goshen; and Mount Nebo, the place where Lot’s wife was turned into a pillar of salt. She had hoped to see the “actual pillar,” but what she saw was only the place where it had stood. Disappointed, she wrote home to her sisters: “The pillar itself, they say, has been submerged in the Dead Sea—at any rate we did not see it, and I cannot pretend that we did” (12.7). She saw the tomb of “holy Job,” Tishbe, the village from which the prophet Elijah got his name, and many other places before arriving in Jerusalem itself. Like other pilgrims, her “first desire” was to see, and the verbs “see” and “was shown” run throughout her account as well as those of other pilgrims.90

In part Egeria’s journey was a grand adventure, a sightseeing tour of biblical history, the breathless journey of one of the idle rich. As she moved from place to place, she dreamed of the time when she could recount her exploits to her sisters back home, very much like the modern pilgrim who is thinking of gathering friends and neighbors for a slide show in the very act of taking pictures of the trip. But she always carried a Bible with her, and when she came to a “holy place,” that is, a biblical or historical site, she read the account of what had happened there. “Whenever we arrived [at any place] I always wanted the Bible passage to be read to us” (4.3). At another site she wrote: “So there too we had a passage read from the Book of Moses” (4.5). The Bible was read not simply to remind the pilgrim of the details of the event that happened at the place; it was also part of a ritual involving prayer and a reading from the psalms. “When we reached this plain [where Moses blessed the Israelites before his death] we went on to the very spot, and there we had a prayer, and from Deuteronomy we read not only the song, but also the blessings he

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pronounced over the children of Israel. At the end of the reading we had another prayer, and set off again, with thanksgiving to God” (10.7). The parallels to Jewish pilgrimage are close. Egeria read the biblical account of what had taken place at the site; her company also offered a prayer and sometimes celebrated Holy Communion. “All there is on the actual summit of the central mountain (Sinai) is the church and the cave of holy Moses. No one lives there. So when the whole passage had been read to us from the Book of Moses (on the very spot!) we made the Offering [Eucharist] in the usual way and received Communion” (3.6). The phrase “in ipso loco” (“on the very spot” in John Wilkinson’s felicitous translation) captures the thrill and excitement of the moment. The experience was without parallel and nothing could prepare people for it.

Of all the places in Palestine where Egeria the pilgrim paused to read the Bible, pray, and offer the Eucharist, Jerusalem stood apart. There the central events in Christ’s life had taken place. By far the longest section of Egeria’s book is devoted to the city of Jerusalem and the holy places contiguous to the city. When Egeria reaches Jerusalem, her narrative changes character; her interest shifts away from “seeing” places to participating in the rituals that took place in the city and describing them to her sisters back home. “Loving sisters, I am sure it will interest you to know about the daily services they have in the holy places, and I must tell you about them” (24.1).

By the time Egeria arrived in Jerusalem, late in the fourth century, Christian worship in the city had begun to settle into distinctive patterns dictated by the presence of the holy places. That Christians could gather for worship at the “very spot” where the saving events had taken place made a deep impression on the Christians living there as well as on pilgrims. Egeria writes: “What I admire and value most is that all the hymns and antiphons and readings they have, and all the prayers the bishop says, are always relevant to the day which is being observed and to the place in which they are used” (47.5). A few details illustrate the practice. On Thursday of the “great week” (Holy Week), after services in the Martyrium (the great basilica), the congregation would return home for a short meal and then gather at the Eleona on the Mount of Olives. After psalms and readings and prayers, they would process to the Imbomon, the hillock of the Ascension on the Mount. Early in the morning they moved to the place where Jesus
had been arrested on Gethsemane, returning to the atrium of the chapel adjacent to Golgotha. On Friday the faithful came to this chapel to venerate the wood of the Cross and to listen to the accounts of his Passion. This was followed by services of prayer in the Martyrium and the Anastasis. On Saturday the paschal vigil took place in the great church, the Martyrium, and afterward the newly baptized were led to the Anastasis (tomb). The bishop went inside the screen of the aedicule and said a prayer for them. Then they returned to the church, where the congregation had continued its vigil.

The development of stational liturgies—rituals celebrated at particular places or stations—is the most visible evidence of the way pilgrimage attained a privileged place in Christian piety. From the beginning, Christian worship had been oriented to time, to the “end time,” the eschatological hope that was foreshadowed in the liturgy, and to “ritual time,” the representing of the historical events of Christ’s life, the suffering, death, resurrection within the context of liturgical celebration. The narrative character of the Gospels (recording Jesus’ life from birth through death) indelibly imprinted on the minds of Christians the sanctity of time. For Christians in Jerusalem, however, the proximity of the holy places made possible a sanctification of space. The liturgy could now be celebrated not only according to the rhythm of Christ’s birth, life, suffering, death, and resurrection, but also at the Eleona (Mount of Olives), or the Imbomon (“little hillock,” place of the Ascension), Golgotha, or the Anastasis—that is, at the places where the events had taken place.

“There Is Something about Touching It”

When the Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial in Washington was dedicated several years ago, I recall that men and women came from all over the United States, some traveling hundreds, even thousands, of miles by car or bus to be present at the site. When they arrived, all they found was a low wall with long lists of names of those who died in the Vietnam War engraved in the black marble. Yet they came, and continue to come, to indulge in the simplest sort of human memorial, seeking out the name of a friend or loved one and running their fingers over the cold stony texture of the engraved letters. “I don’t know what it is,” said one veteran who stood for two hours at the wall. “You have to touch it. There’s something about touching it.”
“There’s something about touching it.” Without the images and impressions of touch and sight and smell, memory is formless and vacuous. Memory that is purely mental, that is not anchored in things, will not endure.7 This elementary truth was understood by the peasant who came to Jerusalem to kiss the wood of the Cross, by Egeria, who celebrated the Eucharist at the holy places, and by learned theologians who had never seen Jerusalem. When the faithful came to receive the wine in the Eucharist, Cyril of Jerusalem urged them to touch their fingers to their lips while they were still wet with wine and then touch the brow and eyes and other organs of sense.8 No one expressed it more clearly in this period than Paulinus, a bishop from the city of Nola in Campania in southern Italy. “No other sentiment draws people to Jerusalem than the desire to see and touch the places where Christ was physically present, and to be able to say from their own experience, ‘We have gone into his tabernacle, and have worshipped in the places where his feet stood’” (Epistola 49.14). Paulinus reasoned that if one wished to recall someone or represent an event, there was no better way than to “see the place” or to touch a fragment of something that person touched, for example, a fragment of the Cross.

Paulinus’ sentiments were echoed by Christians living all over the Mediterranean world, in North Africa, in Palestine, in Asia Minor, and not only in reference to the holy places in Jerusalem. By the end of the fourth century the tombs of martyrs and saints had become places of veneration, drawing Christians to see and touch the remains (relics) of holy men and women buried in their own regions. One bishop wrote: “When one touches the bones of a martyr, one shares in the holiness which is present in the grace inhering in the body.”9 Gregory of Nyssa said that he had buried some of the bones of a group of martyrs alongside his parents. Normally, he said, one does not like to go to a tomb, but at the tomb of a martyr one receives a “sanctifying blessing.” “To touch the corpse itself, if ever good fortune would allow such an opportunity,” is like touching the “living and blooming body itself, bringing in the eyes, mouth, ears and all the senses . . . as though [the martyr] were fully present.”10

As these statements suggest, devotion to the holy places in Palestine did not stand apart from other forms of veneration practiced at this time. A new tactile piety that attached itself to things, to bones and relics, to places and shrines, to sacred books, even to liturgical
implements such as chalices and veils, was evident all over the Christian world. In a letter to Theophilus, pope (patriarch) of Alexandria, Jerome urged that all who minister at the altars in the church show proper reverence for the “accessories” used in the liturgy. These things, he writes, are not “lifeless and senseless things devoid of holiness; from their association with the body and blood of the Lord they are to be venerated with the same awe as the body and the blood themselves.” Elsewhere, Jerome defends the veneration of the bones of martyrs. In kissing and adoring “ashes wrapped in a cloth” (the remains of a saint), he said, it is as though one “beheld a living prophet” in one’s midst.\(^\text{41}\)

This tactile piety, worship with the lips or the fingertips, took many forms, depending on the place or object that was venerated. Some pilgrims journeyed from Jerusalem down through the Judean desert to the Jordan River to bathe at the place where Christ was baptized. Others took home objects that bore a tangible relation to the place they had seen and touched—oil, water, earth, wood, bones. These objects, called “blessings,” allowed the pilgrim to maintain physical contact with the holy place or thing. Holiness was transmitted through touching. The “blessing,” writes the art historian Gary Vikan, was “not a memento to evoke pleasant memories, as is a modern tourist trinket, but rather a piece of portable, palpable sanctity which possessed and could convey spiritual power to its owner.”\(^\text{42}\) Others, dissatisfied with ersatz relics, tried to get the real thing. When the bishop of Jerusalem exposed a piece of the “holy Cross” for veneration, he had to hold it firmly and his deacons had to keep their eyes on the pilgrims, lest, while kissing the Cross, someone tried to bite off a piece.\(^\text{43}\)

For the pilgrim, the “holy places” were not simply historical sites that invoked a memory of the past. Seeing was more than seeing, it was a metaphor for participation. Theodoret of Cyrus tells the story of Peter Galatia, who went down to Palestine (from Syria) “in order that by seeing the places where the saving sufferings had taken place he might worship in them the God who saved us.” Peter, Theodoret reminds us, did not believe that God was “confined to a place.” He knew that God’s nature was without limit. Nevertheless, he went to Palestine to “treat his eyes with the sight of his desire.” It was not enough that the eye of the soul enjoyed God through faith. Peter’s
delight in the holy places was like the pleasure a lover receives from gazing on the clothing or the shoes of the beloved. Wounded with love for God, and longing to see God’s “shadow,” Peter “took himself to those saving places where he could see the founts that gushed forth.”

In Christian discourse, the terms “sign” and “symbol” designated things that could be seen and touched that pointed beyond themselves. They were tiny windows that opened on another world. Among signs, the most important were, of course, water in Baptism, and bread and wine in the Eucharist, but also oil for blessing, relics, and gestures such as the making of the sign of the Cross. Signs were not simply pointers; they also shared in the reality they signified. “With the inner eye one sees the whole power of the Cross in this tiny fragment,” wrote Paulinus of Nola (Epistola 31.1). Hence they deserved honor and veneration.

At several places in his writings Gregory of Nyssa calls the holy places “signs.” On a visit to Jerusalem made, in his words, “according to a vow,” he rejoiced to be able to see the “signs of the Lord’s sojourn in the flesh.” In one place he calls the “holy places” [his phrase!] “saving symbols.” Now Gregory was a subtle and sophisticated thinker, the most rigorously intellectual of all the early Christian writers, and he chose his words with care. In a dispute over the Christian doctrine of God, Gregory had protested against the uncompromising intellectualism of a fellow bishop, Eunomius. One of his arguments against Eunomius rested on an appeal to the necessity of “signs” for Christian faith. According to Gregory, Eunomius transformed Christianity into a philosophical system in which “dogmatic exactness” was prized over all else. What Eunomius overlooked, said Gregory, was that Christianity was not solely a matter of the mind; it also invited “participation in sacramental practices and symbols.”

What did he mean by calling the holy places signs? These places, writes Gregory, had “received the footprints of Life itself,” and for this reason they are palpable reminders that God once walked this earth. Just as perfume leaves an odor in the jar after it has been poured out, so God has left traces of his presence in Palestine. As we are able to savor the fragrance that was once in the jar, so, through the traces Christ left on earth, can human beings glimpse the living reality that was once visible in this land. By visiting those places that bear the

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imprint of “Life itself,” the pilgrim was able to perceive the transcendent God who was beyond human comprehension.

There was, however, another side to Gregory. He was also an articulate critic of pilgrimage, a fact that has caused embarrassment to later advocates of the practice. In the letter in which Gregory had observed that the Lord gave no command to go up to Jerusalem, he also presented several other arguments against pilgrimage. There he states with exemplary brevity the classical theological case against sacralization of place: God is no more present in one place than in another. Even writers who praise and defend pilgrimage—for example, Theodoret of Cyrus in the passage on Peter of Galatia—always qualify their approval with a remark such as, “not as though God is confined to a place.” In his letter on pilgrimage, however, Gregory develops the argument at greater length. What advantage, he asks, is there in being present at the “places themselves”? Can the Spirit not journey to Cappadocia (where Gregory lived)? He is just as present on the altars of Cappadocia as in Jerusalem. There may be a smidgeon of Cappadocian chauvinism here, but the point is clear: change of place does not bring one closer to God.

Gregory’s letter is puzzling in the light of his other statements about pilgrimage and holy places. There can be no question that he had reservations about pilgrimage, especially for monks and nuns. And he also states with his usual lucidity the theological and spiritual perils of a piety that is attached to place. Gregory was a disciple of Origen, the great Platonist theologian, and among Greek Christian thinkers from this period he is the most philosophical. More than any Christian thinker from antiquity, he gave philosophical expression to the belief that God is wholly transcendent, that by definition God is boundless, without extension in space, beyond measure.

Gregory was, however, as much a theologian of the Incarnation as he was of transcendence. As the eighteenth-century patriarch of Jerusalem, Chrysanthus, recognized, the key to understanding Gregory’s devotion to the holy places was not only that God had become flesh but also that God had appeared at particular places. Consequently those places are unlike “other common places.” If God had once been present on earth in Jesus of Nazareth, the soil on which he walked, the cave in which he was born, the stones of the tomb in which he was buried bear the imprints of God’s presence and are, in
the words of John of Damascus several centuries later, “receptacles of
divine energy.”

Christian pilgrimage has had its critics. With its many subsidiary
forms of devotion, its commericalism, its vulgar reliance on touch and
sight, pilgrimage seems to appeal only to the credulous and supersti-
tious. It has been malevolently branded a form of “natural piety” that
has little or no place in the higher spiritual religion of Christianity.
But as Samuel Johnson observed:

[Although] long journeys in search of truth are not commanded, to
visit the place of great actions moves the mind in uncommon ways;
curiosity of the same kind may naturally dispose us to view that
country whence our religion had its beginning; and I believe no one
surveys those aweful scenes without some confirmation of holy reso-
lutions. That the Supreme Being may be more easily propitiated in
one place than in another, it is the dream of idle superstition; but that
some places may operate upon our own minds in an uncommon
manner, is an opinion which hourly experience will justify.

The spirit of Christian pilgrimage is caught in a beautiful book
written by Stephen Graham, With the Russian Pilgrims to Jerusalem.
Graham, an Englishman fluent in Russian, made the pilgrimage with
a group of Russian peasants, walking across southern Russia, sailing
in steerage across the Black Sea and into the Mediterranean. After
observing the intense piety of these pilgrims, he described the differ-
ence between a pilgrim and a tourist. “The road from the Jerusalem
of the tourist to the Jerusalem of the pilgrim is long indeed. The
difference between the man surveying the Church of the Sepulchre
with a handbook and the poor peasant who creeps into the inmost
chamber of the Tomb to kiss the stone where he believes the dead
body of his savior was laid, is something overwhelming to the mind.”