CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 97: The Holy Land

The Land Belongs to God

A Palestinian Christian finds the path from hate to forgiveness.

Elias Chacour with Sue Ellen Johnson

Through the centuries, Romans, Persians, Arabs, Turks, Jews, and even European Christians have conquered, colonized, or invaded the Holy Land, making life difficult for Christian communities. Nevertheless, these followers of Jesus have survived. In this article Archbishop Elias Chacour tells of growing up in the aftermath of the establishment of a Jewish state and dealing with the anger that came from being displaced from home and village. Not all native Christians have learned to forgive and work for peace as has Fr. Chacour. But he has modeled the Christian life in ways that have won the admiration of Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike. He received the World Methodist Peace Award in 1994 and the Japanese Niwano Peace Prize in 2001.

I grew up in the small village of Biram, amidst the Galilean hills. Mother nurtured my faith by relating the parables and teachings of Jesus. I pictured Jesus walking the rocky hills beside me and talked to him as a friend. Father radiated the love of Jesus by praying for the Zionist soldiers who deceived us, confiscated our home and village, and denied their promise that we would return. After years of study abroad, I was ordained to the priesthood of the Melkite (Greek Catholic) Church in Nazareth in 1960.

Learning to read the parables in Aramaic, the "heart language" of my Lord, helped me to understand them better. I interpret the Beatitudes as the Lord's appeal to his followers to get up and get their hands dirty as they work for peace and justice, and not to be satisfied with passively admiring peace and justice.

Prayer became the inspiration for my words and actions. As I acknowledged the suffering of my people, I also recognized the suffering of my Jewish brothers and sisters. We both trace our ancestry to Father Abraham; therefore, we are "blood brothers." As God's blessed children, we all cherish the land on which we live, but we are sojourners. The land belongs to God (Lev. 25:23).

My early ministry in Ibillin was filled with challenges, and by far the greatest was anger anger between neighbors, church members, and even brothers. Only when I confronted my own anger, which had built up over years of humiliation, blind prejudice ("dirty Palestinian"), and a boyhood beating by an Israeli policeman, could I see that I too was capable of acting in revenge. Through my tears, I asked and received the forgiveness of my Lord, just as he had forgiven his crucifiers. In prayer, God showed me a way to lead my congregation out of hate's darkness and into reconciliation's light.

That Palm Sunday, our church was full of stony-faced, hostile people. Instead of pronouncing the benediction, I walked down the aisle and locked the doors. Returning to the front, I said, "Sitting in a church doesn't make you a Christian. Your words say you love God, yet you hate your brother. I have tried to unite you but could not, as I am only a man. It is only through Jesus Christ that forgiveness and reconciliation is born. I will be silent so he can give you that power." Fearfully we waited. Then, one by one, a hate-filled brother or neighbor stood and pleaded for forgiveness. Soon families were sitting together and former enemies sat side by side. Worship began again a liturgy of love and reconciliation.

The healing born on Palm Sunday began to spread throughout the community. Villagers offered to repair the church and parish house. Food was brought from farms or kitchens. Muslims as well as Christians wanted to help whenever needed, and together we built a community center, a library, and school

buildings. Today, we offer education to Christians, Jews, Muslims, and Druze. There are over 4,000 students attending Mar Elias Educational Institutions (MEEI), with classes from kindergarten through university. Peace with justice is possible, but only when Palestinians and Israelis, Christians, Jews, and Muslims put aside distrust and hatred and begin to work together in the spirit of reconciliation and love.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 97: The Holy Land

The Holy Land: Did You Know?

Interesting facts about Christianity in the Holy Land.

THE WAY OF THE CROSS. Only in the Holy Land can you celebrate Jesus' death and resurrection ***in the place where it happened.*** The fourth-century pilgrim Egeria described the Holy Week services in Jerusalem: "What I admire and value most is that all the hymns and antiphons and readings, and all the prayers that the bishops say, are always relevant to the day which is being observed and to the place in which they are used." Today, much like in Egeria's era, thousands of Christians observe Good Friday by following the "Via Dolorosa"—the traditional route Jesus walked on the way to his crucifixion—from the Mount of Olives to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The route and rituals have changed over the centuries, but the devotion has not. Jerusalem Christians' celebration of Easter influenced Christian worship around the world. The practice of following the "stations of the cross" is one example.

HERITAGE IN COLORED STONE. One of the most lasting and beautiful legacies we have of early Christian communities in Palestine and the surrounding region are mosaic floors. This cross is in a very early church in Mamshit, a city of the Nabateans, an ancient kingdom of traders in the Negev desert who converted to Christianity in the fourth century.

OUR LAND. The first Christian writer to mention the term "holy land" was Justin Martyr in his ***Dialogue with Trypho*** (c. 160). Justin was trying to show that the land God promised to Abraham would be inherited by Christians when Christ returned and built a new Jerusalem. But according to Robert Louis Wilken, it was the monks living in the Judean desert who claimed this concept as a present, Christian reality. Sixth-century monastic leaders Theodosius and Sabas wrote to the Byzantine emperor calling themselves "the inhabitants of this Holy Land"—meaning not just a collection of pilgrimage sites but a region with spiritual privileges and a living church. Monasticism played a crucial role in Palestine, and Sabas's monastery is still an active Christian community today.

TO GO OR NOT TO GO? Is there really something "special" about the land of the Bible? Christians have debated this since the earliest centuries of the church. Cyril, the bishop of Jerusalem (c. 348-387), spoke for many when he proudly claimed, "Others only hear, but we both see and touch." Biblical scholar Jerome, who settled in Bethlehem in the 380s, believed that visiting the historical sites can help us understand Scripture better. But he also warned, "It is not being in Jerusalem, but living a good life there that is praiseworthy." Gregory of Nyssa, less enthusiastic about the growing popularity of pilgrimages, assured his congregation that God was just as present with them in Cappadocia as in Jerusalem.

BRINGING JERUSALEM HOME. Modern street vendors didn't invent the souvenir industry. When Byzantine pilgrims returned from Palestine, they brought back relics, oil from lamps above Christ's tomb, and many other tangible reminders of their visit. Some even tried to recreate the Holy Land in their own hometowns. Santa Stefano in Bologna, Italy, was originally a complex of seven churches representing the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and other key holy sites in Jerusalem.

A DWINDLING WITNESS. No church in the world can claim more ancient roots than in Israel-Palestine, where there has been a continual Christian presence since the time of Christ. But in the last 60 years, the number of Palestinian Christians living in the area has dropped from as much as 40 percent of the population to only 2 or 3 percent (estimates vary), while most Palestinian Christians have emigrated elsewhere. The reasons are debated—various groups blame Israel's policies or pressures from the Muslim majority. In 1992 George Carey, then Archbishop of Canterbury, told the ***New York Times*** that he feared in 15 years Jerusalem and Bethlehem would become "a kind of Walt Disney Christian theme

park"—a tourist attraction without a real Christian presence. His prediction is in danger of coming true. But those local Christians who still remain in places like Bethlehem are holding on to their homeland and heritage fiercely.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 97: The Holy Land

Two Thousand Camels

In the Byzantine era, 300 years before the Muslim conquest, the Holy Land bloomed into a center of Christian worship, pilgrimage, and monasticism.

Jennifer Trafton

When I declined the camel ride attraction, my tour guide took me by the elbow and tried to sell me to some Arab merchants standing nearby. "What will you give me for her?" he asked them.

"Nothing," said one, "I already have two women." Another was more indulgent: "Two thousands camels, a Mercedes, and my heart."

It was one of many occasions in Israel when I cringed at being an American tourist. I wondered what the locals thought of our fanny packs, cameras, and gaping mouths. "Excuse me while I admire your history. I'm not really interested in you—just those stones you walk by every day."

As members of an "archaeological study tour," we were not quite as gullible as many modern pilgrims. We met grandiose historical claims with cheerful skepticism. But we were pilgrims nonetheless, following the trail of biblical sites, collecting our souvenir olive wood communion cups, and singing hymns on the bus. It was often hard to strike a spiritual mood amidst the political graffiti, falafel, bargain packs of postcards, and T-shirts urging "Shabbat: Just Do It," but we tried.

The first time I knew for sure that this trip would be worth the itchy passport pocket around my waist was when I stood looking out over the Sea of Galilee at sunset. I could imagine a small fishing boat out there and a dark figure walking towards it over the waves. But the pinnacle, for me, was sitting on the Herodian steps of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. In all of Israel this was the one place where I could be certain that I was sitting where Jesus had walked.

"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 very own experience: 'We have gone into his tabernacle, and have worshipped in the places where his feet have stood.'" Paulinus of Nola said this in the fifth century, and our fascination with the homeland of Jesus still draws millions of Christian travelers to Israel. We ride in cars and buses; earlier pilgrims walked or rode camels. And it's been going on for two thousand years. That's a lot of camels.

But those early pilgrims had another goal besides seeing the holy places; they wanted to meet the Christians who lived there. They went not only to honor the tomb of Christ but to worship with the living Body of Christ.

Sometimes we forget that Israel is more than a playground of biblical tourist attractions or a battleground between Jews and Muslims. For several centuries (long before the Crusades) Palestine was a Christian country, and this forever changed the history of the land. These Palestinian Christians carried on the legacy of the early church, preserved the biblical sites, and survived the Islamic conquest. Robert Louis Wilken reminds us, "The Arabic-speaking Christians who live today in Israel, the West Bank, and Jordan are their descendents and hence the descendents of the first Christians. They are, as it were, the only indigenous Christian community in the world."

It is important, as we look at the history of the Holy Land, not to lose sight of either the land or the church, the worth of a memory or the worth of a human being. (I think I'm worth three thousands camels, at least.)

CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 97: The Holy Land

Not One Stone Left Upon Another

The catastrophic fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 forever changed the face of Judaism—and the fate of Christians in the Holy Land.

Paul L. Maier

Jesus predicted it 37 years before it happened. Herod Agrippa II and his sister Bernice, who heard Paul's testimony at Caesarea (Acts 26), tried hard to prevent it, as did the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (our main source of first-century information). But the fall of Jerusalem and the burning of the Temple in A.D. 70 happened nevertheless, and it was a catastrophe with almost unparalleled consequences for Jews, Christians, and, indeed, all of subsequent history. It compelled a whole new vector for synagogue (not Temple) Judaism, it submerged the Jewish homeland for the next 19 centuries under foreign domination, it helped foster the split between church and synagogue, and it set the stage for rampant prophetic speculation about the End Times that continues to the present day. Few episodes in history have had that sort of impact.

The Jewish rebellion in A.D. 66 that ignited the war with Rome was by no means inevitable. Judaism was a legal religion in the Roman Empire, and Nero's own empress, Poppaea, was very interested in it. Contrary to biblical novels and movies, far worse things could happen to you in the ancient world than to be conquered by Rome. The Romans hung out the traffic lights in their sprawling empire, curbing piracy at sea and brigandage by land, thus providing security in the Mediterranean world. The apostle Paul's missionary journeys would have been impossible without the ***Pax Romana***, the "Roman peace" that ordered society. As for the "horrors" of Roman taxation, I would much rather have paid the tribute to Rome as a citizen of Jerusalem than American income tax!

Still, Rome did have wayward governors who were not always disciplined, even if there was an extortion court set up for this purpose at Rome. Governors of Judea had a particularly difficult role, because according to Deuteronomy 17:15 it was heresy for any Gentile to govern God's people: "You must not put a foreigner over you who is not your brother." Nevertheless, the governors Rome sent to Judea in the first century were able enough, including Pontius Pilate, who could never have had a ten-year tenure there had he been the villain so familiar in sermons and novels.

Gessius Florus, however, Rome's last governor before the Jewish rebellion, made Pilate look like a paragon of virtue by comparison. Emperor Nero, perhaps distracted in the aftermath of the Great Fire of Rome, had not done a good job of screening overseas governors, and this wretch slipped through. Venal, corrupt, and brutal, Florus hoped that a Jewish rebellion would somehow cover his own crimes in Judea, and so he fomented discontent among his subjects wherever possible. Even the first-century Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus commented, "Jewish patience persisted until Gessius Florus became procurator" (***History*** 5.10).

Justifiably outraged, Jerusalemites rose in revolt, even though Jews who had visited Rome warned that war would end in disaster because of Rome's overpowering resources. Zealots in Jerusalem—the "fourth party" after the Scribes, Pharisees, and Essenes, according to Josephus—carried the day, and the Jews won some surprising early victories against the Romans.

Until, that is, Commander Vespasian landed in Galilee with three legions. After that, it was a steady Roman advance southward into Judea, with Jewish strongholds falling one after another along the way. In fact, Vespasian was at the walls of Jerusalem when news reached him of the turmoil in Rome

following Nero's death. Soon Rome's eastern legions declared Vespasian the new emperor. Before hurrying off to Rome in 69 to don imperial purple, he transferred command of the Jewish war to his own son Titus (also future emperor), who would complete the siege and destruction of Jerusalem.

The Burning of the Temple

With careful strategy and maximum resources, Titus finished the job in a matter of months, despite fierce Jewish resistance. Spurning all overtures for peace, the Zealots inside Jerusalem fought amongst themselves as much as against the Romans, while Titus surrounded the city with a siege wall and simply waited. The starvation inside Jerusalem was severe because many of the Judeans from the countryside had taken refuge there. It got so bad, Josephus wrote in ***The Jewish War*** (6.194ff.), that dove dung went for premium prices, and one poor woman even ate part of her own baby!

> The best of friends wrestled with each other for even the shadow of food. Others, mouths agape from hunger like mad dogs, staggered along, beating on the doors like drunken men. ... They put their teeth into everything, swallowing things even the filthiest animals would not touch. Finally they devoured even belts and shoes or gnawed at the leather they stripped from their shields.

After furious fighting inside Jerusalem, the Temple Mount finally fell to the Romans. According to Josephus, Titus had ordered that the Temple itself be spared (though some historians doubt this), but one of the Roman troops hurled a burning firebrand through a window of the Temple and it went up in flames anyway. The date, August 30 in the year 70, was the very day on which Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed the Temple in 586 B.C. What was left was torn down by the victors, almost in literal fulfillment of Jesus' famous statement, "Not one stone here will be left upon another" (Matthew 24:2). This was the catastrophic end of Temple Judaism.

Might it have been the end of Judaism itself? Possibly. The Romans, however, permitted a Jewish sage named Jochanan ben-Zakkai to be smuggled out of the Temple Mount in a casket. He virtually re-founded Judaism in a rabbinical school established at Jamnia near the Mediterranean. The previous central authority of the Temple was now transformed into the regional authority of the synagogue—a tradition that has remained to the present day. Also in Jamnia, the Jewish rabbis established the canon of 39 books in their Hebrew Bible—the Christian Old Testament—in the year 93.

The Bar-Kokhba Revolt

Josephus, our major source for all this information, does not name a single Christian victim in connection with great Jewish War. Why not? With immense luck—or blessing—the earliest Christians largely escaped all this horror for two reasons: (1) Only four years before the war's outbreak, James the Just of Jerusalem (the first Christian bishop according to both Acts 15 and Eusebius) was stoned to death by the Sanhedrin, which must certainly have led the struggling Jewish-Christian community to think about leaving. (2) Eusebius, the "father of church history," also tells us that Christians were warned by an oracle to flee the city some time before war's outbreak. In fact, they evacuated to Pella and other cities north of Jerusalem, and so escaped the Roman siege and conquest.

After the war, some Christians returned to Jerusalem, where they must have kept a low profile since Zealotry and the yeast of Messianism among the Jews led to one last tragic uprising in A.D. 132 under a rebel named Shimon Bar-Kosebah. Rabbi Akiba, the leading Jewish sage at the time, put Bar-Kosebah on a white horse, led him through the streets of Jerusalem, and cried, "The Messiah has come! The Messiah has come!" He also changed his name to "Bar-Kokhba," which means "Son of a Star" (showing us that the gospel writer Matthew did not invent the idea that the Star of Bethlehem was a messianic symbol for Jews).

When the Zealots learned that Hadrian, the Roman emperor at the time, planned to build a new temple to Jupiter on the ruins of the old Jewish Temple, they rose up in revolt. Hadrian had a very difficult time conquering these rebels, some of whom hid out in caves on the western coast of the Dead Sea, where letters written by Bar-Kokhba have been discovered. Some 580,000 Jews perished, and the Romans also suffered great losses until they finally conquered the rebels. Furious at this renewed Jewish uprising and without a shred of patience left, they dismantled Jerusalem and rebuilt the city as "Aelia Capitolina" in honor of Aelius, Hadrian's family name.

All Jews were expelled from the city, and only Gentiles were allowed to live there. (This exile was moderated later when first Jewish Christians and then also Jews slowly returned to the city.) The Roman province of Judea now became Syria Palaestina—further diminishing Judaism in favor of the Philistines who had battled Saul and David a millennium earlier. It remained "Palestine" up through the British mandate in the 20th century and among Arabs to this day.

In the second and third centuries, Aelia Capitolina (a.k.a. destroyed Jerusalem) showed barely a glint of its former glory. It was not a ghost town, but it was sequestered to the boondocks of the Roman Empire.

Church and Synagogue

An equal-opportunity desecrator, Hadrian attacked Christianity when he raised a shrine to Aphrodite adjacent to his new temple at the site of Golgotha, where Christians had held liturgical observances until they fled the city in A.D. 66. But in trying to desecrate the site, he merely helped identify it for later generations.

It is no surprise to learn from Aristo of Pella, an early Christian historian whose works are not extant, that the Jerusalem church after the Bar-Kokhba revolt was now composed almost entirely of Gentiles. In his ***Church History (5.12)***, Eusebius lists 12 Gentile bishops of Jerusalem following Mark, the first.

Early on, Christians in Jerusalem recognized the importance of the sites where biblical events took place. The early Christian apologist Justin Martyr (c. 100-c.165) was born of pagan parents in Nablus, Samaria, and after his conversion to Christianity knew the cave or grotto where Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Melito, bishop of Sardis, visited there in the 160s. The mightiest mind in early Christendom, Origen of Alexandria, spent the last part of his life (230-254) in Caesarea and regularly visited the sacred sites, including Bethlehem.

Slowly, Jews were allowed to return to their Holy City. But other centers of Judaism across the Mediterranean world, such as neighboring Alexandria in Egypt, Ephesus in Asia Minor, Athens, and even Rome, could now compete through their synagogues for the authority once held by the Jerusalem Temple. Those Jewish Christians who had not abandoned the Temple (such as those described in Acts) now had to look elsewhere for cohesion and authority. The split between Jews and Christians only widened in the future.

Both sides were responsible for this cleft. The first persecution of the church was by Jewish authorities in Jerusalem, and even the most cursory reading of Acts reveals the grief that Paul regularly received from synagogues along his mission journeys. Later, in some cities across the Mediterranean, Jews reported Christians to Roman authorities who had been lax in persecuting them. For their part, Christians attributed the destruction of Jerusalem to God's retribution against the Jews for having crucified Christ. Church and synagogue have gone their separate ways ever since. One can only conjecture as to what might have happened to Jews, Christians, and all of subsequent history had Jerusalem not fallen and the Temple endured.

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 97: The Holy Land

Building a Holy City

The First Christian Emperor Inaugurated a New Era in Palestine

Peter Walker

IN A.D. 325, JUST NINE MONTHS after Constantine became sole ruler of the whole Roman empire, Christian leaders came together for their first ever "global summit" – the Council of Nicaea. Their purpose was to debate and state more clearly their understanding of Jesus' identity. Of all the regions represented at that meeting, one province was set to be transformed by the onset of the Constantinian era more than any other—Palestine, the land of Jesus' birth.

Everything changed overnight. Christians in previous centuries ha"d expressed some interest in Jesus' homeland, and a few had even traveled there to see the sites described in the Gospels. Yet the land itself, still under pagan rulers, scarcely reflected the significance that Christians ascribed to it. After all, this was the land that had witnessed the Incarnation! Yet Christians were a small minority there, and the province remained something of a "backwater" within the wider empire.

Now, with a new emperor, there was an opportunity for a "new day. Within just two generations, Palestine was transformed. Christian visitors started arriving in vast numbers, and many stayed and established Christian communities in or around Jerusalem. They built numerous churches and developed a "pilgrimage trail" for those who wished to visit all the Gospel sites. They developed creative forms of worship that were adapted both to the place and to the season, something that would color the nature of Christian worship around the world to this day. Palestine was no longer (from an imperial point of view) a buffer–zone on the eastern border, but a vital—even central—part of the new empire. So began the "Byzantine" era in the Holy Land (so called because Constantine moved the capital of the Roman Empire to Byzantium, renamed Constantinople). It was a 300–year period of economic flourishing, population explosion, and relatively undisturbed harmony.

Bishops, monks, and pilgrims

It is a fascinating page in Christian history filled with colorful characters. There were residents of Palestine like the scholarly Eusebius of Caesarea, whose Church History is our indispensable guide to all things prior to A.D. 300. Eusebius was the elderly "Archbishop" of Palestine in that crucial year of the Council of Nicaea. There was Cyril, the energetic bishop of Jerusalem from 348–387, who almost single–handedly developed the rich new liturgy. And there was Jerome, the slightly angular and awkward "Doctor" of the Latin Church who established a monastery in Bethlehem, where he spent his time translating the Hebrew Bible and other important commentaries into Latin (from 384 until his death in 420).

Then there were those who made brief visits but who left their mark on the land or bequeathed to us a written account of their visit. Queen Helena (Constantine's British mother) made a "royal visit" in 326. The "Bordeaux Pilgrim" visited in 333 and kept a travel diary. Gregory, bishop of Nyssa, returned to Asia Minor frankly unimpressed with aspects of the pilgrimage trade and the lack of "holiness" in the supposed "holy sites" after his visit in the 380s. And the indomitable Egeria, a nun from Spain, spent three years in the East (384–387) and kept a very detailed account of her travels (including trekking on a mule around the Sinai desert!). From her account we get the "inside story" of what it might have been like to travel around Palestine 60 years after Constantine became emperor.

Archaeological epiphany

Some 30 years before Constantine's victory Eusebius had been compiling his ***Onomastikon*** (an alphabetical "gazetteer" to sites mentioned in the Old and New Testaments), but when he came to Golgotha all he could write was this: "Golgotha: this is pointed out to the north of Mount Zion." Local Christians evidently knew the ***general vicinity*** of where the crucifixion had taken place, but it could only be "pointed out" from a distance. This was because a pagan temple dedicated to Aphrodite had covered the place since the time of Hadrian (A.D. 135).

Like Eusebius himself, the bishop of Jerusalem, Macanus, attended the Council of Nicaea. No doubt he took this golden opportunity to discuss the awkward situation with Constantine during the intervals between other business. Macanus returned from Nicaea with just what he wanted: the emperor's command to destroy the pagan temple and build a church in its stead. We have a copy of an imperial letter sent a little later to Macanus (preserved by Eusebius in his ***Life of Constantine***) in which the emperor makes clear his intentions: "My concern is that that sacred place, which at God's command I have now relieved of the hideous burden of an idol which lay on it like a dead weight,... should be adorned by us with beautiful buildings."

Constantine clearly had caught the vision: What better way to mark the new day of his reign than to destroy a pagan temple and to honor Christ at the site of his crucifixion and resurrection? Though buried in shame and disgrace, Christ could now be honored as the King of Kings.

But what would the excavators find? Would this local Christian tradition be revealed as a pious fraud? Would there be any evidence of the place as it appeared in the first century? The stakes were high—for all concerned. So one can almost sense the sigh of relief, indeed the exhilaration and rejoicing, in Eusebius' account of what happened next:

The Emperor gave further orders that all the rubble of stones and timbers from the demolition should be taken and dumped a long way from the site ... and that the site should be excavated to a great depth... As stage by stage the underground site was exposed, at last against all expectation the revered and all—hallowed Testimony (inartyrium) of the Savior';s resurrection was itself revealed, and the cave, the holy of holies, took on the appearance of a representation of the Savior's return to life. Thus after its descent into darkness it came forth again to the light, and it enabled those who came as visitors to see plainly the story of the wonders wrought there, testifying by facts louder than any voice to the resurrection of the Savior.

This, one of the few archaeological excavations known to us from ancient times, proved to be more of a success than anyone could have dared hope for. There, for all to see, was a long–buried tomb. In fact we know Constantine';s builders found several tombs. (Some oven–like burial openings, through which they later had to build their walls when constructing the dome, are visible to this day.) Yet one tomb was evidently singled out as being the tomb of Jesus—presumably because it matched the Gospel accounts in some way. From this many scholars conclude that it is perfectly possible that the excavators identified the right tomb (though, of course, we cannot discount the possibility that, even if the excavators were in the correct general vicinity, the actual tomb lay somewhere nearby).

But was anything else from the first century discovered? It all depends on whom you asked. Bishop Cyril, when conducting his baptism classes on the site 20 years later, was adamant that there was indeed another amazing discovery: the wood of the "True Cross." Some fragments of this precious item, he claimed, had already been dispersed "throughout the known world." The main portion was brought out on display for those visiting Jerusalem on Good Friday.

Traditionally, this discovery of the True Cross is associated with Queen Helena. By the end of the fourth century some elaborate stories developed which linked the wood';s discovery to the time of her visit back

in 326. Yet Cyril and Eusebius, the first recorded witnesses to the excavations, never explicitly made this link to Helena. Eusebius links Helena';s visit more closely with the commissioning of two quite different churches (see below) and does not mention her being involved with this first Constantinian project over the crucifixion site. Indeed, Eusebius never mentions the True Cross at all and may have been skeptical about its historical authenticity. There were probably some lively disputes associated with this project—which would be repeated many centuries later in many archaeological excavations and the building of several churches!

The Holy Sepulchre

So began the building of what is now usually known as the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (see ***Battles over Christ's Tomb***). Called the Church of the Resurrection by the Eastern Orthodox church to this day, this was in fact a complex of buildings that took nearly 30 years to complete (though dedicated for active worship in 335).

Running from east to west, there was first a basilica– shaped church (known as the ***Martyrium*** or "Witness"), then an open courtyard, and then a vast dome over the tomb of Jesus (known as the ***Anastasis*** or "Resurrection"). We can see this arrangement reasonably clearly in the floor mosaic known as the Madaba map. The impressive complex of buildings would stand undisturbed for nearly 700 years. Eusebius waxes lyrical in his description and even ventures the rather farfetched thought that these buildings might be seen as a fulfillment of the prophecy in Isaiah 65:17–19 about the "new Jerusalem."

What prompted this remark was the strong contrast between this site and the opposite hill to the east—the Temple Mount (destroyed in A.D. 70). Christians of Eusebius' day (and throughout the next few centuries) decided it was best for ***that*** hill to be left abandoned and deserted—not least as a visible reminder of Jesus' prophecies predicting the Temple's destruction. Now a new Jerusalem was being established—one that focused on the worship of Christ, the person who had been rejected in the "old" Jerusalem 300 years before. As Cyril would say, rather pointedly, "that Jerusalem crucified him; this Jerusalem worships him."

Transtorming Palestine

But Constantine had not finished. Some speak of his "Holy Land Plan." This may be too grandiose (suggesting a carefully orchestrated strategy with specific goals), but clearly this project began to attract both his energies and those of the local Christians.

Soon two more churches were being built near Jerusalem: the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem and a church on the Mount of Olives (known as the ***Eleona*** or "olive church"). Eusebius saw these buildings, together with the Holy Sepulchre, as forming a significant triad: Each represented one of the three main clauses of the Christian creed (namely, Jesus' birth, his crucifixion and resurrection, and his ascension). He also linked them together as being focused on three "caves"—the cave where Jesus was born (the tradition of Jesus being born in a cave goes back to the first half of the second century); the cave/tomb of Jesus' burial; and the cave on the Mount of Olives, which Christians had previously identified as the place where Jesus spoke privately to his disciples about the Temple's destruction (Mark 13 and parallels).

These were the churches that Egeria enjoyed.during her visit in the 380s. Indeed, by her day there were others near Jerusalem: for example, the Lazarium (over Lazarus's tomb in Bethany), a church in Cethsemane, and a church on Mount Zion that commemorated Pentecost. The face of Jerusalem was being transformed.

Constantine's interest spread beyond Jerusalem. He ordered the construction of a church at the site of Mamre (near Hebron), associated in biblical thought with the three strange visitors to.Abraham (Gen. 18:1– 22). Eusebius and others understood this event as an instance of a theophany, a visible

manifestation of God.

Constantine may have seen the worldwide Christian church as the fulfillment of Cod's promise that Abraham would be the "father of many nations"—or he may have modeled his own life on Abraham, sharing a sense of destiny.

A man called Count Joseph also asked Constantine to consider funding the construction of some churches in Galilee—probably the ones in Nazareth and Capernaum. Theoretically Galilee was, for obvious reasons, very much on the Christian map, but by the fourth century it had become the center of Rabbinic Judaism. The construction of these church buildings seems to have sparked some local opposition. Yet Christian tourists (such as Egeria herself and Jerome's friend Paula) still ventured north.

Popular stopping–points included the lakeside area just to the west of Capernaum (Heptapegon, now known as Tabgha), the village of Cana, and Mount Tabor (the supposed site of the transfiguration). Byzantine Christians clearly wanted to "map out" the scenes of the Gospel and show visitors the sites. Yet in each of these last three instances, it is highly likely that they chose the wrong site. This raises the perennial question of authenticity: Did Byzantine Christians have any secure basis for selecting the sites for their churches?

Each case needs to be judged on its own merits, but the overall pattern is that where there was some local tradition prior to Constantine, the Byzantine identification may be regarded as fairly reliable (this includes most of the Jerusalem sites mentioned above). In many instances, however, such local tradition and memory had sadly been lost; so they were operating in the dark, choosing sites as best they could on the basis of their own reading of the Gospels—and convenience. Judging from the Bordeaux Pilgrim, over–eager pilgrims were often pretty gullible. Today, any visitor to the Holy hand has to deal with this same tension between pilgrimage "certainties" and historical authenticity.

The Holy City?

The New Testament writers don't normally talk of particular places as "holy" or spiritually significant. "True worship" is not connected to particular places but is instead a matter of "spirit and truth" (see John 1:14; Col. 3:1–2; John 4:21–24). If anything, Jesus himself is the true "holy place" (for example, in John 2:19–21 he embodies the significance of the Temple, the "holy place" of the Old Testament). Jesus' coming has shifted God's purposes into a new era. Thus, in these days of the New Covenant, the physical Jerusalem is in "slavery with her children," and instead believers are to focus on the "new" or "heavenly" Jerusalem (for a full discussion, see my book Jesus and the Holy City, Eerdmans, 1996).

This attitude seems to have been the dominant view in the first three centuries. Early Christians like Justin Martyr saw the catastrophic destruction of the city in 70 and again in 135 as evidence that God's purposes had left Jerusalem behind. Eusebius was indebted to the Alexandrian school of thought (represented by theologians such as Origen), which emphasized the spiritual nature of the Christian faith —often contrasted with the so–called "physicality" of Jewish faith. So most of his writings are littered with references to the heavenly Jerusalem and fairly dismissive remarks about the Jerusalem below.

It is only when Eusebius, at age 65, had to find words to describe the discovery of Jesus' tomb that he suddenly started using the language of "holy places." Thereafter, such terminology became commonplace — as seen constantly in the writings of Cyril and Egeria. The Incarnation had made this place sacred. After all, Palestine was the one place in the world that could be described as God's "footstool" (Psalm 132:7), understood by Christians of that era to mean the very "place where his feet had trod." The new attention being given to the places associated with Jesus caused a seismic shift in Christian attitudes toward the land itself.

Cyril saw the physical Jerusalem as having an undeniable pre–eminence in God's saving purposes. (Such

a this—worldly focus is hardly surprising, given that he was the up—and—coming bishop of Jerusalem!) He interpreted the reference to the holy city in Matthew 27:53 as ***"this*** Jerusalem, in which I am now standing." He constructed a theology, based on the bedrock of the Incarnation, that emphasized the enduring spiritual importance and "holiness" of both Jerusalem and the sites visited by Jesus.

In so doing, Cyril may unwittingly have committed the church to a theology that culminated in the Crusades (the quest to rid "holy places" of supposedly "unholy" people). Much Protestant thought ever since has tended to be cautious about using "sacred" language too freely and to be wary of pilgrimage. Yet the physical rootedness of our Christian faith will not go away, and the existence of the "Holy Land" reminds us of this. An overly spiritual approach can be unhelpful in itself, or perhaps provoke an unhelpful opposite reaction.

Despite its obvious dangers, the flowering of Christian interest in the Holy Land in the fourth century may be a challenge to us all to treasure aright our common Christian history. Some would see the Byzantine period as the golden era of the church in this land, and it certainly is a stark contrast to the situation in modem Israel. We have seen how the Byzantines expressed their faith in the land of Christ's birth. This inevitably raises the question of how we should bear witness appropriately to that same faith and also support those who have that delicate task in the (much more complex) Holy Land of today.

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 97: The Holy Land

Battles over Christ's Tomb

The holiest site in Christendom has endured an unholy amount of destruction and violence.

Gary M. Burge, professor of New Testament at Wheaton College

Every year, hundreds of thousands of Christian pilgrims visit the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (as it is known by Protestants) in Jerusalem. Historians and archaeologists increasingly support its claim to be built on the site of Jesus' burial. But the church we see today is not the original church built in Constantine's era, and the site has seen tragedy and tensions for 1400 years.

When the Persians invaded Jerusalem in 614, they set the Church of the Anastasis, or Resurrection (as it was then called), on fire, killing countless priests and deacons who had taken refuge there. The Byzantines retook the city promptly, expelled the Persians, and restored the church.

The first Muslim conquest in 638 was utterly different. Caliph Umar refused to pray in the church out of respect, lest it be turned into a mosque, and so the church was spared. Four hundred years of uninterrupted devotion continued. But in 1009, an Egyptian Fatimid ruler, al-Hakim bin-Amr Allah, ordered the complete destruction of the church and its sacred tomb, despite the complaints of his mother and sister, who were Christians. Within three years, the caliph relented and permitted Christians to rebuild the church. Even al-Hakim's mother (Maria) came to Jerusalem to aid in the work as compensation for her son's madness. This rebuilding essentially gave the church its present form. Almost all of what can be seen now stems from this era, rather than the era of Constantine.

When the Crusaders arrived in 1099, they increased the adornment and strengthened the church's walls. They added chapels, enclosed the rock of Calvary, and built the sanctuary just east of the tomb—the Katholikon—for services. It was a breathtaking feat of medieval engineering at its finest (domes and illumined ceilings), which fixed the shape of the church for the next 850 years.

But during those centuries, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre has also been a source of deep and sometimes violent rivalry between Christians. The Greek Orthodox, Armenian Apostolic, and Roman Catholic churches—and later the Coptic Orthodox, Ethiopian Orthodox and Syriac Orthodox churches—have struggled to share its holy spaces. Conflict was so acute in the 19th century that in 1852 the Muslim Sultan Abd al-Majid I issued an edict called "the Status Quo," declaring that the spaces held that year by rival churches could not change. No doors, no windows, not even a ladder could be moved. (The ladder you see in the upper right window in photos has been there for over 150 years!) This edict was affirmed by the British in 1917 and by the Israelis in 1967. But distrust continues. Some priests are locked in the church each night just to make sure nothing is removed from their chapels.

Muslims have controlled the entrance to the church ever since the Crusaders were driven out in 1187. Today, a Muslim family holds the key.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 97: The Holy Land

Tracing the Footsteps of Jesus

A fourth-century pilgrim left behind a vivid eyewitness account of the Land of the Bible and how Jerusalem Christians celebrated Holy Week.

Jennifer Hevelone-Harper

From the fourth through the sixth centuries, people across the Mediterranean world flocked to the Roman province of Palestine. They were drawn by a new Christian understanding of the historical and spiritual significance of the region. The church father Jerome described his friend Paula's response when she arrived in Jerusalem from Rome: "Before the Cross she threw herself down in adoration as though she beheld the Lord hanging upon it: and when she entered the tomb which was the scene of the Resurrection she kissed the stone which the angel had rolled away from the door of the sepulchre. Indeed so ardent was her faith that she even licked with her mouth the very spot on which the Lord's body had lain, like one athirst for the river which he has longed for." Many foreign visitors settled in Palestine, embracing the monastic life of prayer.

The Christian Holy Land of this era can be seen most clearly through the eyes of a fourth-century woman named Egeria, a nun from Spain who traveled to the East and recorded what she witnessed for her monastic sisters back home. Not all of her account survives and little is known about her, but what has been preserved shows us how Christians responded to the land of the Bible and celebrated Christ's resurrection in Jerusalem.

By Camel, Mule, and Foot

Egeria's account is unusual for the time because a woman wrote it, but her activities were not out of the ordinary. There is ample evidence that wealthy Western women, often widows, traveled to the Holy Land and Egypt and gave generous donations to monasteries they visited. They were motivated by a desire to see the places where Jesus had lived, to visit the sites associated with the Old Testament prophets and patriarchs, and to meet holy men and women practicing monasticism in this region. Such travelers considered wandering so far from home to be a form of spiritual discipline, like prayer, fasting, and celibacy. They acted out the spiritual reality that Christians are only sojourners on earth whose citizenship is in heaven.

Travelers faced real hardships, from the threat of shipwreck and pirates aboard cargo vessels, to the lack of fresh water in arid climates. Inns were physically and spiritually dangerous, filled with thieves and prostitutes. Monasteries fulfilled their call to hospitality by building guesthouses for pilgrims. Some travelers, such as the Bordeaux Pilgrim and the Piacenza Pilgrim, wrote itineraries that not only inspired other pilgrims but also offered practical guidance for the unfamiliar terrain (something like a Byzantine ***Lonely Planet*** guide!) In the midst of his accounts of the holy men and women he encountered, the Piacenza Pilgrim constantly noted the availability of drinking water. At the tomb of Rachel between Bethlehem and Jerusalem, for example, each traveler could draw seven pints of fresh water—a generous ration for one who had crossed a desert by camel with only two pints a day.

Egeria usually traveled by foot, although sometimes she hired mules. She had ample financial resources for her traveling party, which probably included servants and, in dangerous regions, imperial guards. Egeria was certainly in charge of her itinerary, deciding how long to stay in each location and choosing new destinations. Her journey lasted at least three years. Local monks and clergy served as her guides to the holy places and celebrated the Eucharist with her and her companions.

A Pilgrim's Itinerary

The beginning and end of Egeria's travelogue are missing, but we can outline large portions of her route once she reached the East. After arriving from Constantinople, she explored biblical sites surrounding Jerusalem. She made longer trips to Egypt, Galilee, Mt. Sinai, and Mt. Nebo. After celebrating Easter in Jerusalem, Egeria traveled to Antioch and east to the Syrian city of Edessa to pray at the shrine of the apostle Thomas. The bishop of Edessa graciously welcomed her, articulating her motive and that of other Christian visitors: "My daughter, I see that you have taken on yourself, because of your piety, the great task of journeying from very distant lands to these places. Therefore ... we will show you whatever places there and here that Christians like to see."

In addition to places associated with Jesus, Egeria sought out Old Testament sites because she understood the history of the Israelites to be part of the Christian gospel. She visited many sites in Egypt, including the "plain above the Red Sea ... where the children of Israel cried out when they saw the Egyptians pursuing them" and the "city of Pithom, which the children of Israel had built."

She described the arduous climb up Mt. Sinai: "By the will of Christ our God, and with the help of the prayers of the holy men who were accompanying us, I made the ascent, though with great effort, because it had to be made on foot, since it was absolutely impossible to make the climb in the saddle." Her joy at visiting the place where God spoke to Moses is evident: "Once all your wishes have been fulfilled and you have come down from there, then you can see it in the distance."

Egeria was not a tourist but a worshiper. At holy places she read appropriate Scriptures, sang Psalms, prayed, and shared the Eucharist. She was as eager to meet holy men and women as to visit holy places. Monks had settled at many places associated with events from the Bible. Their ability to point out the historical details of nearby biblical sites reveals how Palestinian and Egyptian Christians guarded communal memories. They were concerned about historical accuracy and confessed their inability to preserve certain sites. Egeria explained why she was unable to see the pillar of Lot's wife: "The pillar is said to have been covered by the Dead Sea. ... The bishop of that place ... told us that for some years now the pillar has not been visible." Some Christians viewed the physical remains in the Holy Land as symbols of spiritual realities in a believer's life. But Egeria saw the holy sites and the Christians who lived there as witnesses to the historical reality of Scripture.

Egeria had scholarly motives that corresponded with her spiritual ones. In Edessa she obtained copies for her own monastery's library of the legendary correspondence between Jesus and King Agbar of Edessa. Egeria promised her sisters at home that they should read them: "Although I had copies of them at home, I was clearly pleased to accept them ... in case the copy which had reached us at home happened to be incomplete; for the copy which I had received was certainly more extensive." This shows that women's monasteries in late antiquity were centers of learning as well as prayer.

Holy Week in the Holy City

The focal point of Egeria's entire account is her description of worship in Jerusalem. She carefully observed how the Christians there observed the liturgical year, paying particular attention to the services of Holy Week. In many respects, worship in the Holy Land, with its daily pattern of prayer at appointed hours, vigils, singing of psalms, and the celebration of the Eucharist, would have been familiar to Egeria's fellow Christians in the West: "Everything is done which is customarily done at home with us."

But Christians in Jerusalem had the added witness of geography to augment their liturgy. They physically moved from place to place in Jerusalem during Holy Week as they remembered the events of Christ's Passion. Christians could literally trace the footsteps of Jesus.

The remains of the Jewish Temple did not feature prominently in Egeria's account; rather, the focus of Christian worship in Jerusalem was Golgotha. Visitors today to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre see a building constructed in the Crusader period, but Egeria worshipped in the church complex sponsored by the Emperor Constantine, under the supervision of his mother Helena, and later imperial patrons. Eusebius described the sculpted ceiling of Constantine's church as "like a vast sea, over the whole church; and being overlaid throughout with the purest gold, caused the entire building to glitter as it were with rays of gold."

Christians fasted during Lent in order to prepare spiritually for Easter. During this period, clergy instructed catechumens (those seeking baptism) in basic Christian doctrines. On Palm Sunday, Christians processed from the Mount of Olives to the city. "All the children who are present here," Egeria described, "including those who are not yet able to walk because they are too young and therefore are carried on their parents' shoulders, all of them bear branches, some carrying palms, and others, olive branches." Services continued throughout the week, gaining intensity on Maundy Thursday as people gathered at Gethsemane to remember the Last Supper and Judas' betrayal.

On Good Friday, believers approached individually to kneel before and kiss the wooden remains of the True Cross. Deacons were set to guard this precious relic of Christ's Passion after one eager worshiper had tried to bite off and steal a piece of the wood. "There is no one, young or old," Egeria wrote, "on this day who does not sob more than can be imagined for the whole three hours, because the Lord suffered all this for us."

Prayers and Scripture reading continued through midnight on Holy Saturday. Then the catechumens were baptized, clothed in white robes, and led forth by the bishop to share as full members of the church body in the Easter Eucharist. Egeria noted the stamina of the worshipers, who participated in as many of the long services as they were physically able. After Easter, all feasted in celebration of the resurrection. Festivities continued until Pentecost, when a procession to the Mount of Olives lasted a full day.

Something to Write Home About

We do not know when Egeria eventually returned home, but we are certain that her account reached the West. A seventh-century Spanish monk named Valerius praised her for making the remarkable journey and reported that she became the abbess of her community. Many Western pilgrims returned home carrying mementos such as the small vessels called ampullae, decorated with scenes of Christ's Passion and filled with holy oil; Egeria brought the letters from Edessa, and she treasured her memories. The desire to share with her sisters the liturgical and monastic practices of the Holy Land consumed her. One of the Jerusalem customs that proved popular in the West was the practice of processing around the city from church to church during Holy Week. The practice continues today among Christians who observe the Stations of the Cross on Good Friday.

Egeria's exuberance at visiting places where biblical events transpired was not only about sacred history. Her desire to meet Christians who prayed and worshiped in those places testifies to her belief that the faith preserved in the Holy Land was a living reality. She was willing to wander for years, enduring rigors and uncertainties, because she understood that the universal church transcended the limits of time and geography. Her message continues to teach those of us who cannot make the journey ourselves.

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 97: The Holy Land

The Living Desert

Thousands of monks and nuns sought to turn the Holy Land into a land of holy people.

John Chryssavgis

Toward the end of the third century, Chariton of Iconium (in Asia Minor) was tortured at the hands of the emperor Aurelian for being a Christian. After his release, Chariton pledged to go on pilgrimage to Jerusalem as a way of thanking God for his survival. But as he was approaching the Holy City, bandits attacked him, robbed him of his possessions, and took him to a cave in the Judean desert. When his captors died, he decided to settle permanently in the Holy Land and established a monastic community near Jericho.

In the fifth century, Mary, a harlot from Alexandria, Egypt, traveled with some pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem "in the hope of seducing them." Out of curiosity, she followed them into the church of the Holy Sepulchre, where she was miraculously barred from entering. Her repentance provided the necessary key for entering the magnificent basilica—she was, in a sense, baptized by her own tears. After leaving the church, Mary withdrew to the nearby Judean desert.

Jerusalem and its surrounding lands have always been a unique and powerful place for religious transformation. Pilgrims traveled to Palestine in order to see and honor the places where Jesus Christ lived, taught, and died. But for some pilgrims, like Chariton and Mary, the experience led to a lifelong commitment to poverty, prayer, and self-renunciation.

The monastics who chose to stay in the Holy Land became objects of pilgrimage themselves. Later pilgrims traveling through Palestine during the Byzantine era came not only to honor the holy sites; they also sought the advice of "holy" men and women who had settled in the region. For such pilgrims, the monastic Christians living in the Holy Land represented a tangible link to the disciples of the apostolic church.

These monastics clearly recognized their debt to those who first inhabited this hallowed ground: the prophets of old who had professed the Messiah with their teaching, and the martyrs of more recent times who confessed Christ with their blood. The monks and nuns of Palestine saw themselves as protectors of a legacy—geographical, theological, and spiritual—that originated in the Old Testament, persisted through the New Testament, and survived in their own time. They were preserving, even promoting, a centuries-old heritage. In this land, so they were convinced, God once walked. The desert was not barren; in this land, God still lived.

The Lausiac History, a fourth-century travel account of Egyptian and Palestinian monasticism written by Palladius, describes the devil tempting a monk in the Judean desert about the virtue of his monastic life. "What are you doing here?" asked the devil. "Nothing," replied the monk, "I am simply keeping the walls."

Monastic pioneers

Monasticism was "in the air" in the fourth and fifth centuries. Antony gave up his possessions to live a solitary life of prayer in the Egyptian desert, inspiring thousands. Pachomius brought monks together into a new kind of communal life. Cassian took Eastern monastic ideals to the West, where Benedict of Nursia created his own model of Christian community.

Palestine played an important role in this monastic explosion. Biblical precedents and personalities—Elijah, Elisha, John the Baptist, and Jesus himself— attracted faithful visitors and aspiring monastics. The austere cliffs and caves of the Judean desert stretching east of Jerusalem to the Dead Sea presented a double advantage: remoteness and accessibility. You could walk just an hour from the Holy City and find yourself in the wilderness.

No one is sure who first sought out this spiritual refuge. The historian Eusebius records that, toward the middle of the third century, a bishop of Jerusalem named Narcissus fled to the desert in order to avoid scandalous rumors. Others sought to escape persecution or barbarian invasions. Chariton is often considered the pioneer of monasticism in the wilderness immediately outside Jerusalem. Others chose to remain in or near the holy sites themselves: the renowned Roman matron Melania the Elder and her companion Rufinus founded monastic communities on the Mount of Olives, while the scholar Jerome and his aristocratic friend Paula did the same near the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. These were frequented by intellectuals such as Evagrius and Cassian.

Monks flocked to Palestine from nearby Egypt and Syria and also from far-away Rome and Gaul. By the early fourth century, the diversity of pious pilgrims and monastic luminaries gave Palestinian monasticism its own unique aristocratic, international, and ecumenical character.

Colonizing the desert

One monastic luminary in the fifth century was Euthymius (376-473), a monk from Armenia. Euthymius settled first in Chariton's monastery, then wandered in the remote desert nearer to the Dead Sea. There, he converted and baptized an entire tribe of Arab Bedouins after healing the leader's son. The leader, renamed Peter, became the first Arab bishop in Palestine.

Euthymius's lifestyle attracted hundreds of others to follow his example, including Sabas from Cappadocia in Asia Minor, who became an important monastic leader and builder of monasteries. (Their lives were chronicled in the sixth century by Cyril of Scythopolis, the first Palestinian Christian historian). Euthymius and Sabas primarily sought solitude and silence in the stillness of a cave. But as their reputation grew, other disciples and visitors from Jerusalem gathered around them, for whom they felt increasingly responsible. So they organized communities for those who approached them for spiritual direction.

Palestinian monasticism was unusually flexible. Monastics were free to move through the three stages and distinct lifestyles of early monasticism, graduating from life in community (the ***cenobitic*** way) to small groups (in scetes) and even complete solitude in the desert (as hermits). The monks forged new ways of living ***both*** in solitude and in community—dwelling alone in cells or caves during the week but coming to a central area for worship and other communal business on Saturdays and Sundays. During the 40 days of Lent, monks went out in pairs to the desert, where they led an austere and regimented ascetic life in complete solitude. On the eve of Palm Sunday, they returned to the central community for Holy Week and celebrated Easter either in their monastery church or in the church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.

Letters from a monk's cell

Monastic communities sprang up not only in the Judean desert but also in Galilee and especially in the area around Gaza to the southwest. According to Jerome, the founder of monasticism there was Hilarion (291-373), a native of Palestine who had been inspired by Antony of Egypt.

By the sixth century, monasticism in Gaza was thriving, primarily due to the reputation of two elders, Barsanuphius the Great ("the great old man") and John the Prophet ("the other old man"). The first was from Egypt; the latter was possibly from the region of Beersheba. From the seclusion of their cells, these

two elders communicated with visitors only by letters dictated through secretaries. Barsanuphius and John were not eccentric miracle-workers, extreme ascetics, or charming visionaries, but practical advisers. They offered teaching, encouragement, and hope to people in their day-to-day struggles: "Simple advice according to God is one thing; a command is another. Advice is counsel without compulsion."

Some 850 examples of their remarkable correspondence survive, written in response to questions from church leaders, monks, and laypeople about issues ranging from personal temptation to interpersonal relations, from employment to property, from spirituality to superstition, from dealing with heretics to taking a bath! The letters were filled with encouragement: "Rejoice in the Lord! Rejoice in the Lord! Rejoice in the Lord!"

Where the mystery took place

The monks and nuns of Palestine ultimately give the Holy Land a historical, political, and ecclesiastical significance in its own right. In an unprecedented letter to the Byzantine emperor at the beginning of the sixth century, the monastic leaders Sabas and Theodosius claimed: "We the inhabitants of Jerusalem, as it were, on a daily basis touch with our own hands the truth through these holy places in which the mystery of the incarnation of our great God and Savior took place."

The fifth and sixth centuries were the golden age of Palestinian monasticism. After Jerusalem fell to the Arabs in the mid-sixth century, the center of Christian monasticism shifted to Italy and Asia Minor. But the monasteries in Palestine recovered, helped to preserve Christianity in the land, translated Christian writings into Arabic, and nurtured Christian intellectuals like John of Damascus. To this day, the historical and international elements of Orthodox monasticism in the Holy Land continue to exercise a powerful attraction to pilgrims and visitors, and also to men and women who dedicate their lives to "keeping the walls."

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 97: The Holy Land

The Ten Thousand Monk March

Monastic Christians in Palestine showed both a passion for orthodoxy and ecumenical sensitivity.

John Chryssavgis

In 451, a decisive ecumenical council took place in Chalcedon, a suburb of Constantinople. The resulting statement—which defined Christ as being one "person" with two "natures," divine and human—caused deep and permanent rifts in the worldwide Christian church. The debates over the word "nature" estranged Western Christians from Monophysite ("one nature") Christian groups in Egypt, Syria, and Palestine and split Eastern Christians into those who followed Chalcedon and those who did not.

In 516, Patriarch Elias of Jerusalem called on the monastic leader Sabas to join him in endorsing the council's decision. Sabas gathered 10,000 monks (almost half of the desert population at the time!) in the Holy City, where they and the people of Jerusalem shouted their anathema of those who promoted heresy and division. Cyril of Scythopolis recorded that the commander of the army in Jerusalem fled to Caesarea "in fear of the multitude of monks."

In the past, historians have tended to emphasize the role of bishops and councils in determining Christian doctrine, but in more recent years they have learned not to underestimate the role of the people—including monks. Sabas's monastic protest and the subsequent letter he and his fellow monks wrote to the Monophysite emperor shows how seriously the monks of the Holy Land took their responsibility to uphold orthodoxy. Jerusalem, they believed, was "the eye and light of all the world."

But the monks of Palestine were not always so aggressive in their theological debates. An anecdote from the life of Isaiah of Scetis (ca. 489) reveals the openness and generosity of monastics in the region. When two monks approached the renowned Monophysite elder to ask whether they should keep holding to the Chalcedonian doctrine of Christ, Isaiah's closest disciple Peter conveyed the answer: "The old man says there is no harm in your church; you are well as you are and as you believe." (Peter himself did not share the views of his elder, hastening to add his own commentary: "The old man lives in heaven and does not know the ills done in the council!")

Isaiah's ecumenical sensitivity gained the respect of Chalcedonians and Monophysites alike in the centuries that followed. In fact, his Chalcedonian successors, Barsanuphius and John, were never explicit about their personal doctrinal convictions, refusing to take sides in a battle over "idle words" and discouraging their disciples from condemning their opponents.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 97: The Holy Land

After the Temple

Palestine may have acquired a new Christian face, but to the Jews it was still the Land of Israel.

James Strange

In the late fourth century, the biblical translator and monk Jerome described the Jews coming to observe the ninth day of the month of Ab, the anniversary of the destruction of the Temple. "Overcome with mourning," he wrote, they "are prohibited from entering Jerusalem. So that they may be allowed to weep over the ruins of their own city they pay a hefty price, and those who shed Christ's blood now shed their own tears."

Once a majority in the land, the Jews became ***personae non gratae*** in their own spiritual capital after A.D. 70. Most fled north to cities like Nazareth and Sepphoris in Galilee. Some fled to Europe, Asia, and North Africa. A few moved south of Jerusalem and Bethlehem to a small area called Daroma ("South" in Aramaic). Archaeological discoveries of Jewish ritual baths and stone vessels show that daily Jewish life continued in various places throughout the land—but not in Jerusalem.

The Jews' fortunes depended on who was emperor at the time and what mood he was in. In the fourth century, Constantine gave Count Joseph of Tiberias, a Jewish believer in Christ, permission to build churches in Sepphoris (then known as Diocaesarea), Tiberias, Capernaum, and Nazareth—all in Galilee. But after Constantine died in 337, his sons began to restrain Jewish populations throughout the empire. The emperors Theodosius II and Justinian codified these anti-Jewish sentiments into laws—for example, seizing the property of any Christian who converted to Judaism. But Jews were not stripped of citizenship and were usually allowed to maintain their own customs. At the other extreme was Emperor Julian (362-365), called "the Apostate" because he tried to reestablish pagan worship. Julian raised the Jews' hopes by promising to rebuild the Jewish Temple, but the building project was soon halted by his assassination.

Despite these political uncertainties, the few surviving Jews in Judea after A.D. 70 managed to grow and eventually to thrive.

A new kind of Judaism

Public Jewish identity had to change in order to survive. A Jewish intellectual elite emerged in Sepphoris that redefined Judaism. Without a Temple, this new Judaism focused on the synagogue (defined as ten men gathered as Israel to declaim Torah) and on family rituals. Synagogues had already existed before Jesus' birth (see Luke 4:14-30). Archaeologists have excavated more than 50 synagogues in Palestine, dating mainly from the third century to the sixth century A.D. These buildings gradually became more and more elaborate, featuring beautiful mosaic artwork and dedications in Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic.

Jewish literature also blossomed. The third-century rabbis believed that their discussions preserved and applied the Law originally given to Moses on Mt. Sinai in its oral form. The written Law was the Torah. The oral Law, also known as the oral Torah, became the Mishnah. Around 200, Rabbi Judah the Prince and his colleagues recorded the Mishnah in Hebrew. By the fourth century (around the time when Christianity became a legal religion in the empire), the rabbis, possibly in Tiberias, published an Aramaic commentary on the Mishnah, including a series of new applications of its laws, which we call the Jerusalem Talmud. This was followed nearly two centuries later by the Babylonian Talmud, an independent document from the Jewish Diaspora in Mesopotamia (modern Iraq).

Heresies and hopes

Meanwhile, hostility between Jews and Christians was growing. Most Jews knew Christians only as Gentiles, who were condemned as fornicators and idolaters. The Tosefta Hullin 2.24 (a third-century Jewish source) tells the story of a rabbi named Eliezer who encountered a known follower of Jesus and had a brief conversation with him. Because of this, the rabbi was later accused of heresy, but was released by the judge. From the point of view of third-century Judaism, Christianity was a heresy. Christians, after all, saw messianic prophecies in many biblical texts that the rabbis did not understand to be messianic at all, including Isaiah 7:14: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive."

In this time of uneasy coexistence, Jewish Christians were caught in the middle. Though some Jews did convert to Christianity during this period, Gentile Christians often considered them heretics. Origen and Eusebius reported that some Jewish Christians, especially those called Ebionites, observed the Law, did not believe in the virgin birth, practiced circumcision, and celebrated Passover according to the Jewish calendar. Eusebius added that he knew Jewish Christians who observed both the Jewish Sabbath and the Lord's Day. During this period, Christians were working very hard to define their beliefs and practices over against both pagans and Jews. Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians grew farther and farther apart.

If Jews did not accept Christians' messianic beliefs, they held on tightly to their own messianic hopes and looked toward the day when the Temple would be rebuilt and the kingdom restored to Israel. Around A.D. 135, four distinguished rabbis visited the ruins of Jerusalem. The Babylonian Talmud records, "When they reached Mt. Scopus, they tore their garments [in grief]. When they reached the Temple Mount, they saw a fox emerging from the place of the Holy of Holies. The others started weeping, but Rabbi Akiva laughed because, if the prophecy of Micah 3:12 was fulfilled that Jerusalem would be destroyed, then also the prophecy of Zechariah 8:4 would be fulfilled: 'Old men and women shall yet sit in the streets of Jerusalem.'"

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 97: The Holy Land

When Jerusalem Wept

The holy city fell first to the Persians and finally to the Muslims. But Christianity in the Holy Land lived on.

Robert Louis Wilken

In 614, the armies of Chosroe II, king of the Sassanids, who had ruled the Persian Empire since the third century, entered Jerusalem, occupied the city, and captured the relic of the holy cross. For centuries the Sassanids and Romans had fought with each other for control of the vast area between the Euphrates and the Mediterranean. But this was the first time the Persians had penetrated Palestine and taken, in the words of a Christian eyewitness, "that great city, the city of the Christians, Jerusalem, the city of Jesus Christ."

Nothing better shows the transformation of the land of Israel since A.D. 70 than the fact that when Jerusalem was captured by the Persians it was the Christians, not the Jews, who sang a lament over the Holy City. As the Sassanid forces made their way through the cities and towns of Palestine, a new wave of messianic fervor broke out among the Jews, who welcomed the invaders and offered them support. But by the seventh century, Christians throughout the Roman Empire identified with Jerusalem and its fate. When John the Almsgiver, patriarch of Alexandria in Egypt, heard that the Persians had ravaged the Holy City, "He sat down and made lament just as though he had been an inhabitant of the city." Jerusalem's fall reverberated across the Christian world.

Laments for the Holy City

Strategos, a monk of the monastery of Sabas, wrote an eyewitness account of the Persian invasion. He described the seizure of the holy cross, the capture and deportation of the patriarch Zachariah, and the sack of the city. He also related stories of valiant Christians who stood firm in the face of adversity, such as a deacon who saw his two daughters cut down by the Persians because they would not "worship fire." The Persians pillaged and killed women, children, and priests. "And the Jerusalem above wept over the Jerusalem below," Strategos wrote.

Strategos drew parallels between the destruction of Christian Jerusalem and the ancient Israelites being taken away by the Babylonians. As Zachariah and the other captives were led out of the city, Zachariah extended his hands toward the city and said as he wept, "Peace be with you, O Jerusalem, peace be with you, O Holy Land, peace on the whole land; Christ who chose you will deliver you."

Sophronius, who became patriarch of Jerusalem after Zachariah, composed another lament over Jerusalem. It begins,

> Holy City of God,
> Home of the most valiant saints,
> Great Jerusalem,
> What kind of lament should I offer you?
> Children of the blessed Christians,
> Come to mourn high-crested Jerusalem

For Sophronius, as for other Christians of his time, the earthly Jerusalem had taken on the qualities of the heavenly city. "Zion," Sophronius wrote, was "the radiant sun of the universe." These laments over Jerusalem sum up the beliefs and attitudes that had been developing for centuries. That "holy Jerusalem"

would be "laid waste" brought to the surface feelings that few Christians fully understood.

The Sassanid occupation of Jerusalem was a temporary interruption of Christian rule. The Byzantine emperor Heraclius launched an unexpected counteroffensive through Armenia and northern Syria directed at Persia itself. Chosroe II had just died, and the Sassanids sued for peace. By the spring of 629, Heraclius reached Palestine, returning the most sacred relic of Christianity, the holy cross. In March of that year he entered Jerusalem in triumph.

Yet the victory, through real, was short-lived. In less than a decade, Muslim armies would be at the gates of the city.

The patriarch and the caliph

When the Muslim armies streamed into Palestine in the summer of 634, they struck first in the vicinity of Gaza on the Mediterranean coast. Once they had gained the loyalty of local Arabic-speaking tribesmen living in the deserts, they began to lay siege to the cities. Again and again, the emperor's troops were forced to retreat. Though the Byzantines outnumbered the Muslim forces by as much as four to one, the Roman armies were no match for these fervent warriors from the desert. When the Muslims routed the emperor's legions at the Yarmuk River, a small tributary that runs into the Jordan River south of the Sea of Galilee, the way was open to Jerusalem and Caesarea.

It had long been the custom (and still is today) for the Christians in Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of the Nativity with a solemn procession from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. In 638, with the invaders camped outside Jerusalem, the aged Sophronius and the rest of the faithful celebrated Christmas huddled behind the walls of the city.

Only two decades after Zachariah was taken captive by the Sassanids, Sophronius watched helplessly as invaders again swept across the Holy Land. To him was assigned the unhappy task of negotiating a treaty with Caliph Umar, the Muslim conquerer of Jerusalem. The meeting between the representative of the Christian Roman civilization and the general of the new religion from Arabia was so filled with drama and historical significance that several detailed accounts have come down to us.

According to a Christian chronicler writing in Egypt in the 10th century, the caliph and his companions sat in the courtyard of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. When it came time for prayer, he said to Sophronius, "I wish to pray." Sophronius led him into the church and laid a mat down for him, but Umar refused to pray there and instead went out and prayed alone on the eastern steps of the church. He said, "Do you understand, O patriarch, why I did not pray within the church? ... If I had prayed in the church it would be ruined for you. For it would be taken from your hands and after I am gone the Muslims would seize it saying, 'Umar prayed here.'" Umar then wrote a document forbidding the Muslims to pray in that church. In return, he asked Sophronius for a place to build a mosque, and Sophronius led him to a rock on the Temple Mount where God had spoken to Jacob, and which Jews had called the "holy of holies." Because of Jesus' prophecies about the destruction of the Temple, Christians had never built a church there.

According to Muslim accounts of this story, Umar wanted a mosque to be built on the site of Solomon's Temple, which had been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar. The Muslims venerated Jerusalem as the city of Abraham, Jesus, and other prophets mentioned in the Quran. The Arab conquerors of the Holy Land were not simply belligerents; they were the vanguard of a new religion that made a spiritual as well as a political claim on Jerusalem. The commanders of their armies were harbingers of a new civilization that would displace the language, transform the institutions, remake the architecture, and convert much of the population in a region that had been dominated for a thousand years by the cultures of Israel, Greece, Rome, and Christianity.

In his Christmas sermon in 638, Sophronius cast the Muslim invasion in the same terms that Christians had used to interpret the Persians: The Arabs were God's instruments to chastise Christians for their sins, and in time the invaders would be driven from the Holy Land. But with the arrival of Muhammad's armies and the swift establishment of Arab hegemony in the region, Christian rule in Jerusalem came to end, decisively and definitively.

The country of the Christians

Like the Jews before them, some Christians began to hope for a Messiah-like deliverer who would drive out the "godless Saracens" and restore the "kingdom of the Christians" to Jerusalem. His coming would inaugurate a great age of peace and prosperity in Palestine and prepare the way for the final triumph over evil and for the reign of Christ. Though such hopes were disappointed, the idea of a Christian Holy Land did not perish. In the generations immediately after the Muslim conquest, seeds were already sown that would sprout 400 years later in the Crusades.

The arrival of the Muslims did not mean the displacement of the Christians any more than the coming of Roman rule had meant the end of Jewish life in the land. Most Christians in Palestine and greater Syria were native to the region and had no other place to go. Furthermore, it appears that the destruction during the conquest was relatively minor, and in many places life went on without interruption. Christians built new churches and repaired old ones. In the early eighth century, the Muslim caliph Al-Walid called Syria (which included Palestine) the "country of the Christians," a place where one could find "beautiful churches whose adornments were a temptation and whose fame was widespread." The Dome of the Rock on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem was intended to rival the great domed churches of the Christians. Two centuries later, a Muslims visitor observed, "Everywhere the Christians and the Jews are in the majority; and the mosque is empty of the faithful and of scholars."

Christianity was not a passing phenomenon in the history of the Holy Land. Christians began to adopt Arabic, the language of the conquerors, as a language for Christian worship and scholarship. They began to make the slow transition to a new culture and society shaped by the religion of Muhammad.

Witnesses of the gospel

In the early eighth century, several generations after the Muslim conquest, John of Damascus, a monk from Mar Saba, reflected on the significance of the holy places in Christian life and memory. John was defending the use of icons (images painted on wood) in Christian worship, and he observed that there were other kinds of material images. Among these were "places in which God had accomplished our salvation." By means of such images, he said, "things which have taken place in the past are remembered." Places like Mount Sinai, the cave at Bethlehem, and the garden of Gethsemane were palpable signs of God's continuing presence on earth: "Christ has given us ... ***traces*** of himself and ***holy places*** in this world as an ***inheritance*** and a ***pledge*** of the kingdom of heaven." They are "witnesses that confirm what is written in the book of the Gospel."

Stones, however, do not speak, as this wise monk knew well. His little treatise is not simply a list of places, it is a catalog of ***churches***—a testimony to the perseverance of Christian life in the Holy Land. Only people, not stones and earth and marble, can bear an authentic witness.

For Christians, the Holy Land is not simply an illustrious chapter in the Christian past. As Jerome wrote to his friend Paula in Rome, urging her to come and live in the Holy Land, "The whole mystery of our faith is ***native*** to this country and city." No matter how many centuries have passed, no matter where the Christian religion has set down roots, Christians are wedded to the land that gave birth to Christ.

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 97: The Holy Land

The Holy Land: Christian History Timeline

2000 Years in the Holy Land

Roman (63 B.C. — 324 A.D.)

c.**30-33** Death and resurrection of Jesus

66 Jewish rebellion ignites war with Rome; Christians flee city

70 Roman army led by Titus destroys Jerusalem and Jewish Temple

132—135 Bar Kokhba leads second Jewish revolt

135 Emperor Hadrian conquers Jerusalem and renames it "Aelia Capitolina"; Jews are expelled from city; pagan temple built over site of Jesus ' tomb

313 Edict of Milan ends persecution of Christians

The Byzantine Period (324-638)

324 Constantine becomes sole ruler of Roman Empire and decides to shift capital from Rome to Byzantium (Constantinople)

325 Eusebius publishes Church History; Macanus, bishop of Jerusalem, attends Council of Nicaea

326 Constantine orders construction of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre; excavation uncovers tomb of Christ and supposedly pieces of the Cross

c. **326-328** Queen Helena visits Palestine and builds churches 333 "Bordeaux Pilgrim" visits Palestine and keeps a travel diary

335 Church of the Holy Sepulcher is dedicated for worship

337 Constantine dies; Eusebius publishes Life of Constantine

339 Dedication of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem

c.**348 —387** Cyril is bishop of Jerusalem

362—365 Emperor Julian "the Apostate" tries to reestablish pagan worship and promises to rebuild Jewish Temple

373 Melania the Elder and Rufinus found monastic communities on the Mount of Olives

384—386 Jerome and Paula establish monastery in Bethlehem

384—387 Egeria travels in the East and keeps a detailed account of her trip

391 Emperor Theodosius the Great outlaws paganism, making Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire

c. 400 Rabbis in Tiberias compile Jerusalem Talmud

405 Euthymius, a monk from Armenia, settles in the Judean desert

410 Visigoths sack Rome

443 Empress Eudocia is banished and settles in Jerusalem, improving the city and its walls

451 Council of Chalcedon defines two natures of Christ; Jerusalem becomes the fifth patriarchate (with Constantinople, Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch)

516 Sabas and monks of Palestine gather to support Chalcedon

527—565 Byzantine Palestine reaches its height during the reign of Emperor Justinian

555—558 Cyril of Scythopolis writes biographies of the monks of Palestine

614 Persians sack Jerusalem

630 Emperor Heraclius invades Persia & recovers the True Cross, returning it to Jerusalem

Early Arab (638-1099)

639 Jerusalem surrenders to Muslim Caliph Umar

691 Caliph Abd al-Malik builds Dome of the Rock

716 John of Damascus becomes a monk at the monastery of St. Sabas, where he writes defenses of icons and one of the first Christian critiques of Islam

1009 Muslim Caliph alHakim persecutes Christians and destroys churches, including Holy Sepulchre

1071 Seljuk Turks capture Jerusalem

1095 Pope Urban II calls for First Crusade

Crusader (1099-1291)

1099 Crusaders conquer Jerusalem

1187 Muslim Caliph Saladin conquers Jerusalem

1291 Crusaders are expelled from the Holy Land

Mamluk (1260-1517)

1260 Mamluks of Cairo conquer Palestine and capture Crusader strongholds

1335 Franciscans return to Jerusalem to serve needs of Christian pilgrims

Ottoman (1517-1917)

1517 Ottoman Turks conquer Jerusalem

1537-42 Suleiman the Magnificent rebuilds the walls of Jerusalem and undertakes many other architectural projects

1852 Muslim edict defines the "status quo" of property in the Holy Sepulchre

1880s Jewish refugees from Russia and other parts of Europe begin to settle in Palestine

1897 First Zionist conference is held in Basel

British (1917-1948)

1917 Balfour Declaration supports Jewish home in Palestine; British capture Jerusalem during World War I

1923 British Mandate for Palestine begins

Modern State of Israel (1948-)

1948 British withdraw; David Ben Gurion declares Jewish State of Israel; first Arab-Israeli war begins

1967 Six-Day War; Jerusalem is reunited

CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 97: The Holy Land

The Holy Land: Recommended Resources

Guides for travelers

- Jerome Murphy-OConnor, The Holy Land: An Archaeological Guide from Earliest Times to 1700 (Oxford, 4th ed., 1998)
- Peter Walker, In the Steps of Jesus: An Illustrated Guide to the Places of the Holy Land (Zondervan, 2006)

Historical writings

- Cyril of Scythopolis, ***The Lives of the Monks of Palestine***, translated by R. M. Price, annotated by John Bins (Cistercian Publications, 1991)
- ***Egerias Travels***, translated by John Wilkinson (Aris & Phillips, 1999)
- Eusebius, ***The Church History***, edited by Paul L. Maier (Kregel Publications, 1999)
- Josephus, ***The New Complete Works of Josephus***, translated by Whiston, commentary by P. Maier (Kregel Publications, 1999)
- ***Josephus: The Essential Works***, edited by Paul L. Maier (Kregel Publications, 1994)
- ***Jerusalem Pilgrims Before the Crusades***, translated by John Wilkinson (Ads & Phillips, Ltd., 2002)
- ***Letters from the Desert: Barsanuphius and John,*** translated by John Chryssavgis (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003)

To learn more

- Betty Jane Bailey & J. Martin Bailey, ***Who are the Christians in the Middle East?*** (Eerdmans, 2003)
- Meir Ben-Dov, ***Historical Atlas of Jerusalem*** (Continuum, 2002)
- Martin Biddle, ***The Church of the Holy Sepulchre*** (Rizzoli, 2000)
- John Bimis, ***Ascetics and Ambassadors of Christ: The Monasteries of Palestine 314-631*** (Clarendon Press, 1994)
- Derwas J. Chitt ***The Desert a City: An Introduction to the Study of Egyptian and Palestinian Monasticism under the Christian Empire*** (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995)
- Jennifer L. Hevelone-Harper, ***Disciples of the Desert: Monks, Laity, and Spiritual Authority in Sixth-Century Gaza*** (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005)
- Yizhar Hirschfeld, ***The Judean Desert Monasteries in the Byzantine Period*** (Yale, 1992)
- Ora Limor and Guy G. Stroumsa, eds., ***Christians and Christianity in the Holy Land*** (Brepols, 2006)

- Anthony O'Mahony, GÃ¶ran Gunner, and Kevork Hintlian, eds., ***The Christian Heritage in the Holy Land*** (Scorpian Cavendish, 1995)
- Joseph Patrich, ***Sabas, Leader of Palestinian Monasticism: A Comparative Study in Eastern Monasticism, Fourth to Seventh Centuries*** (Dumbarton Oaks, 1995)
- Oskar Skausaune and Reidar Hvalvik, eds., ***Jewish Believers in Jesus*** (Hendrickson, 2007)
- Robert L. Wilken, ***The Land Called Holy*** (Yale, 1992)

Related topics from CHRISTIAN HISTORY & BIOGRAPHY

- Issue 40: ***The Crusades (available at www.ctlibrary.com)***
- Issue 59: ***The Life & Times of Jesus of Nazareth***
- Issue 64: ***Anthony & the Desert Fathers***
- Issue 74: ***Christians & Muslims***

CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 97: The Holy Land

The Land Belongs to God

A Palestinian Christian Finds the Path from Hate to Forgiveness

By Elias Chacour with Sue Ellen Johnson

Through the centuries, Romans, Persians, Arabs, Turks, Jews, and even European Christians have conquered, colonized, or invaded the Holy Land, making life difficult for Christian communities. Nevertheless, these followers of Jesus have survived. In this article Archbishop Elias Chacour tells of growing up in the aftermath of the establishment of a Jewish state — and dealing with the anger that came from being displaced from home and village. Not all native Christians have learned to forgive and work for peace as has Fr. Chacour. But he has modeled the Christian life in ways that have won the admiration of Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike. He received the World Methodist Peace Award in 1994 and the Japanese Niwano Peace Prize in 2001.

I GREW UP IN THE SMALL VILLAGE of Biram, amidst the Galilean hills. Mother nurtured my faith by relating the parables and teachings of Jesus. I pictured Jesus walking the rocky hills beside me and talked to him as a friend. Father radiated the love of Jesus by praying for the Zionist soldiers who deceived us, confiscated our home and village, and denied their promise that we would return. After years of study abroad, I was ordained to the priesthood of the Melkite (Greek Catholic) Church in Nazareth in 1960.

Learning to read the parables in Aramaic, the "heart language" of my Lord, helped me to understand them better. I interpret the Beatitudes as the Lord's appeal to his followers to get up and get their hands dirty as they work for peace and justice, and not to be satisfied with passively admiring peace and justice.

Prayer became the inspiration for my words and actions. As I acknowledged the suffering of my people, I also recognized the suffering of my Jewish brothers and sisters. We both trace our ancestry to Father Abraham; therefore, we are "blood brothers." As God's blessed children, we all cherish the land on which we live, but we are sojourners. The land belongs to God (Lev. 25:23).

My early ministry in Ibillin was filled with challenges, and by far the greatest anger between neighbors, church members, and even brothers. Only when I confronted my own anger, which had built up over years of humiliation, blind prejudice ("dirty Palestinian"), and a boyhood beating by an Israeli policeman, could I see that I too was capable of acting in revenge. Through my tears, I asked and received the forgiveness of my Lord, just as he had forgiven his crucifiers. In prayer, God showed me a way to lead my congregation out of hate's darkness and into reconciliation's light.

That Palm Sunday, our church was full of stony- faced, hostile people. Instead of pronouncing the benediction, I walked down the aisle and locked the doors. Returning to the front, I said, "Sitting in a church doesn't make you a Christian. Your words say you love God, yet you hate your brother. I have tried to unite you but could not, as I am only a man. It is only through Jesus Christ that forgiveness and reconciliation is born. I will be silent so he can give you that power." Fearfully we waited. Then, one by one, a hate-filled brother or neighbor stood and pleaded for forgiveness. Soon families were sitting together and former enemies sat side by side. Worship began again — a liturgy of love and reconciliation.

The healing born on Palm Sunday began to spread throughout the community. Villagers offered to repair

the church and parish house. Food was brought from farms or kitchens. Muslims as well as Christians wanted to help whenever needed, and together we built a community center, a library, and school buildings. Today, we offer education to Christians, Jews, Muslims, and Druze. There are over 4,000 students attending Mar Elias Educational Institutions (MEEI), with classes from kindergarten through university.

Peace with justice is possible, but only when Palestinians and Israelis, Christians, Jews, and Muslims put aside distrust and hatred and begin to work together in the spirit of reconciliation and love.