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CHURHST 764: Becoming Divine

Gazing at the Greatest Navel:

Eastern Orthodoxy’s Understanding of the Holy-Unholy City Jerusalem

In a 2011 interview in Jerusalem, the Jewish-American filmmakers Joel and Ethan Coen were given a bizarrely worded question by an Israeli audience member: “Wouldn’t it be perhaps an extraordinary thing if you came to make a film in Jerusalem, the holy-unholy city of Jerusalem? Think about it.” Personally, the more interesting aspect to “think about” was not what an Israel-bound Coen film would look like, but why this woman would describe Jerusalem as “the holy-unholy city.” What did she mean? And, for Christians, which part of her binary should we assign to the city itself: holy, or unholy? Being raised in an American Evangelical tradition, I have always thought of it as the former, as though it has a special dignity in God’s eyes and continues to serve a special purpose for bringing in His kingdom.

However, the Eastern Orthodox patristic and contemporary leaders’ writings understand it in a considerably different light. The Orthodox churches have consistently argued that Jerusalem is meant to be cherished for its history, visited for its potential enrichment of Scripture’s stories, and spiritually contemplated, but not to be deemed more “sacred” than any other land on earth or to be believed to somehow bring Christians closer to God by sheer proximity. For them, Jerusalem was important historically, but after the Christ event is no longer essential for salvation or perfect worship. This stance has had the positive effect of creating a separation from many violent historical episodes in Western Christianity, and has created the ground to simultaneously combat both blind Zionism and anti-Semitism while being faithful to Scripture and tradition.

In response to contemporary Protestant Zionism, Metropolitan Philip Saliba (1931-2014) said, “My plea is that modern Protestant theologians and students of Scripture take a critical and objective look at how the Church has interpreted the Bible throughout history.”[[1]](#footnote-686) Since Christians hold that the Bible is sacred scripture, it is important to analyze how the city of Jerusalemfunctions in it, and then how the Orthodox fathers interpreted those passages. One important biblical description of Jerusalem and its surrounding area is that it is “the promised land,” a description used often from Exodus to Joshua (e.g. Exod 12:25, Deut 6:3). Naturally, two questions immediately arise: to whom was it promised, and is it still? The simple answer to the first is that it was promised to the Jews freed from Egyptian slavery; the answer to the second is considerably more complex, and so requires “a critical and objective” inquiry.

Many of the Church Fathers interpreted Scripture, the Old Testament in particular, through a typological or allegorical lens, meaning that the allegorical reading would “describe spiritual realities, such as Christian virtues and vices, in accounts of tangible, concrete events” and the typological reading would read the “events and characters of the Old Testament as foreshadowing...of the events and characters in the story of the incarnation, earthly ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ or life of the church.”[[2]](#footnote-16803) This led several of the Church Fathers—notably Justin Martyr, Gregory of Nyssa, and Jerome of Stridon—to eschew any special importance or significance of Jerusalem after Christ’s resurrection.

The first Father to use these interpretations concerning Jerusalem in writing was Justin Martyr (AD 100-165) in his *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*, arguing that “the land grant to ancient Israel was tied to a particular era of history and is surpassed by salvation in Christ. The inheritance promised to Abraham will be bestowed upon all people of any ethnic group who believe in Christ and renounce sin, ‘because by our similar faith we have become children of Abraham.’”[[3]](#footnote-10938) Justin made the comparison of Jesus to Joshua, who share a name in Hebrew, but have drastically different “lands” they are gaining for God and His people. Joshua, the proto-Jesus, was getting the physical land for the Jews delivered from Egypt, making the original Jerusalem a place for God to dwell in the Temple, but Jesus gets a new place for God to dwell: the Christian’s body. The city of Jerusalem, to Justin, has lost its significance in light of the *new* Joshua’s death and resurrection. The “temporary, transitory, and worldly Promised Land” had its historical function, but has been replaced by Christ’s new “eternal and spiritual” Promised Land.

Gregory of Nyssa, a highly influential Cappadocian Father in Orthodox churches, makes a similar argument in his *Life of Moses*, except, instead of Joshua, he typologically uses Moses as the Christ-prototype to argue against Jerusalem’s significance for Christians. Gregory argues that the Bible, especially Jesus Himself, holds Moses in greater esteem than Joshua, and so his life should be emulated more than Joshua’s. Which of the two entered into the Promised Land? Joshua. But who was closer to God, saw His backside, received His commandments, and was present at the Transfiguration with Elijah? Moses. So, Gregory asks, is it more important to God to get to the Promised Land (Jerusalem), or to grow closer to God (Sinai)? “The journey toward God...has no end-point in this life, but is an unending ascent toward the infinite and unknowable God; the goal is to keep moving. Moses never entered the Promised Land, and the Promised Land is not even an object of interest in Gregory’s story.”[[4]](#footnote-25111) Ultimately, seeking to conform to God’s will spiritually was infinitely more important than seeking anything that could be located on a map.

Stemming from these theologians’ methods, the Eastern Orthodox church had the foundation to read Scripture and pre-Christ human history to conclude that Jerusalem is no more important than Moscow or Lima. However, Moscow and Lima never had the Temple. Is not *that* the true importance of Jerusalem, rather than the dirt, stones, and land-grab? God chose Jerusalem for a place to build His dwelling place, so should not the location of the Temple still have some significance? In a similar fashion to their interpretation of Scripture, many of the patristics interpreted the Temple’s role as irrelevant after Christ. Cyril of Jerusalem (AD 315-386), who was the Archbishop of Jerusalem, argued that the Temple’s destruction in AD 70 should be viewed as the new Wall of Jericho coming down.[[5]](#footnote-9866) There was a special land that was protected by a wall, but God destroyed it so His people could inherit His promise and be with Him. In light of Christ, though, the Temple in Jerusalem had become the new wall of Jericho, preventing outsiders from being with Him. When the Romans destroyed it, it symbolized that the Temple, and so Jerusalem, were now as irrelevant as the destroyed Wall of Jericho—God was now open to everyone everywhere every day. The body of the Christian, not a city in the Middle East, was God’s dwelling place. Metropolitan George Khodr (b. 1923) added that when the exiled Jews longed for Jerusalem, they longed for God’s presence in the Temple, not the land or building itself, so now that God’s presence was equally accessible anywhere on earth God’s people could no longer be in exile and so should never “long for Jerusalem.”[[6]](#footnote-19520)

But theologians rarely have the influence they wish they did, so regardless of their consistent spiritual dismissal of Jerusalem, the Orthodox leaders still saw Christians flock to Jerusalem as early as the fourth century (after Christianity had become legal in AD 313). But since the Temple was gone and they were not going to rebuild it, why were they going there? Starting with Constantine I’s mother Helena alleged discovery of the cross that Jesus was crucified on, Jerusalem changed from a Jewish city to a Christian one.[[7]](#footnote-7519) Christians from all around came to see the places where Christ walked, talked, and performed miracles in the Bible, and once those places were found, thriving churches and “elaborate liturgies” were created there.[[8]](#footnote-13514) Previous to this, most of the visitors had come for intellectual curiosity, not for any spiritual mission.[[9]](#footnote-10050) So, then, should the Church have an official stance on pilgrimages? Condemn it? Mandate it? The Orthodox Church chose neither: they mostly ignored it in ecclesial meetings and debates.

Though it had popular appeal, pilgrimages never officially made it into ecclesial doctrines of the Eastern Orthodox tradition.[[10]](#footnote-23377) However, the theologians were interested in what insights a trip to Jerusalem could bring to the average Christian’s life. Many of the Orthodox leaders encouraged staying with monks or in hospices, and the monks near Jerusalem would take care of the pilgrims’ “spiritual needs,” functioning as “guides at holy sites, performing the special pilgrimage liturgy enacted there, and sometimes gave the pilgrims *eulogiae*, ‘blessings’, souvenirs that held benedictory powers and which created an intimate and lasting bond between the pilgrim and the holy places.“[[11]](#footnote-30409) These pilgrimages continued, though less safely after the fall of the Roman empire, relatively consistently until the Persians and the Muslims sieged Jerusalem, beginning in AD 614.[[12]](#footnote-28694)

The purposes of pilgrimages to the Holy Land change considerably after this for the Latins because of a new emphasis on Penance and the ensuing Crusades, but the Orthodox churches’ attitudes remained the same, ranging from relative indifference to mild encouragement.[[13]](#footnote-18863) And “though the majority of pilgrims arrived in the Holy Land from Eastern countries, the *Itineraria* was a Western genre....and most of our knowledge of Eastern Christian pilgrimage is derived from other genres, mainly hagiographic works that include a short account of [their] pilgrimage within the broader frame of [their] biography.”[[14]](#footnote-17417) For them, traveling to Jerusalem was neither theubiquitous Christian mission nor could it be mandated from a hierarch to prove repentance, but rather a route one *could* take in seeking God. The hagiographies noted that it was merely onething that a saint did, and was not necessarily more important than their other deeds. Seeing the sites could improve one’s spiritual life, but could not replace the Christian’s true journey, the spiritual one into God’s infinitude.

The Orthodox churches’ theological understanding of Jerusalem has had an added effect of combating blind Zionism and anti-Semitism, two morally and politically charged contemporary issues. As Carole Burnett put it, summing up her arguments concerning the patristic tradition, “it is obvious...[the patristics] assign a symbolic significance to the land of milk and honey, or...simply ignore the land....Today’s Orthodox thought is grounded firmly on this patristic root.”[[15]](#footnote-19449) If the land is insignificant, then ultimately it does not matter who holds it as long as they abide by God’s law, the same rule that applies to any other city, or as Patriarch Ignatius IV (1920-2012) put it when asked about the Zionist debates, “people, not stones, are [the Church’s] concern.”[[16]](#footnote-3983) And because the Orthodox do not believe that the Jews are a special type of people, they implicitly and explicitly make the case that Jews need to be distinguished from Israelis. This has the effect of not being forced to condemn or promote Jews or Judaism because of the actions of the Israelis, allowing Orthodox Christians to evaluate their actions solely on Christian morals, without any asterisks for a Chosen People who require a Promised Land. As Father Peter Gillquist put it, “Orthodox Christians know that if Israel wants to form a secular state and regroup as a people, they can certainly do so. But they cannot claim to be there by divine intent,”[[17]](#footnote-30732) or similarly Archbishop Theodosios, that Zionists need to “reread their Bibles...to differentiate between God’s promise and the Balfour promise, because the Occupation is the result of a promise given to the Israelis by Lord Balfour and not by God.”[[18]](#footnote-6958)

So if I am baptized Orthodox, do I have to see it as The Holy City, or as an unholy city? According to the patristic and contemporary theologians, it can be the “holy-unholy city of Jerusalem.” It can function as a holy city to the faithful Christian seeking God, but it can become unholy if it becomes an idol rather than an icon, a complement rather than a supplement, a Joshua rather than a Jesus.

Works Cited

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1. Burnett, 105. [↑](#footnote-ref-686)
2. Burnett, 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-16803)
3. *ibid*., 98 [↑](#footnote-ref-10938)
4. Burnett, 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-25111)
5. Burnett, 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-9866)
6. Burnett, 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-19520)
7. Limor, 329. [↑](#footnote-ref-7519)
8. Limor, 328. [↑](#footnote-ref-13514)
9. *ibid.,* 329. [↑](#footnote-ref-10050)
10. Burnett, 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-23377)
11. Limor, 333. [↑](#footnote-ref-30409)
12. *ibid.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-28694)
13. Limor, 343. [↑](#footnote-ref-18863)
14. *ibid.,* 347. [↑](#footnote-ref-17417)
15. Burnett, 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-19449)
16. *ibid.*, 105. [↑](#footnote-ref-3983)
17. Burnett, 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-30732)
18. *ibid.*, 107. [↑](#footnote-ref-6958)