

“The Holy Land” History and Reality of the Term

by Kirsten Hoffgren Pedersen

With the December 1989 issue of its magazine, the National Geographic Society of Washington, D.C., published another of its fine maps, this time in the series “Special Places of the World.” That map bears the title “The Holy Land.”

The Society apparently forgot to ask for advice from two groups of people who scorn the name. On the one hand, there are those for whom the term is automatically suspect because they see it as “anti-Zionistic” or even “anti-semitic.” On the other hand are those who claim that the name of the Land is Palestine, and that it is not and has never been any holier than any other land in the world. In the latter camp there are even those who in recent years have called it “the Unholy Land,” or publicly pronounced the opinion that it is getting less and less holy.¹ Even so, it remains a religious, historical and sociological fact that this country **is** holy to Jews, Christians and Muslims.

The Evidence of Pilgrimage and Immigration

Because the Land is so firmly regarded by Christians as holy, since the early fourth century A.D. it has been and still is the goal for millions of Christian pilgrims. All this, even though Christianity is the only one of the three major Abrahamic monotheistic religions which has no commandment of pilgrimage to holy places. The Jewish adult male is expected — based on biblical commandment (Deut. 16:16) — to visit Jerusalem on the three *regalim*: Pesah, Shavuot and Sukkot. To make the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a Muslim’s life is one of the five pillars of Islam.

1. *The Unholy Land* is the title of a book which until recently was on display in various stores in East Jerusalem. The assertion that it is getting less and less holy appeared in an interview with a leading Palestinian Christian in the Danish newspaper *Kristeligt Dagblad* around Christmas 1989.

Christianity not only lacks such a commandment, but misgivings about the notion of pilgrimage have been expressed from time to time throughout the Church's history. Already in the New Testament, there is a hint of resistance to the idea of pilgrimage. In the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, she said to him, "Our fathers worshipped in this mountain; and you say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship." But Jesus answered her, "Believe me, woman, the hour comes when neither in this mountain nor at Jerusalem shall you worship the Father" (John 4:20–21).

Perhaps an echo of that passage is found in some statements of the Church Fathers concerning the Holy Land. St. Gregory of Nyssa, for example, wrote to a friend of his:

You who fear the Lord, praise Him in the places where you are. A change of place does not bring you any closer to God. But wherever you may find yourself, God will come to you. Therefore, my dear friend, give the brethren that advice, that they rather undertake a pilgrimage out of their body towards God, but not out of Cappadocia towards Palestine.²

In like manner, St. Jerome wrote — from Bethlehem! — to Paulinus:

The gates of heaven stand open in Britain quite as well as in Jerusalem.... Do not think that anything is missing in your faith, because you have not seen Jerusalem. Do not therefore consider us as any better, because we are able to live in this place.³

But there could also be another reason for these expressions of opinion on the part of the Church Fathers — a matter to which few writers, if any, seem to have paid attention. Both the Fathers quoted are answering questions from prospective pilgrims, people who possibly took their advice and never came to the Holy Land. But why did they ask at all? Because thousands of their contemporaries (including both the Fathers concerned!) did come.

Sir Ronald Storrs, Governor of Jerusalem during the British Mandate, pinpointed the connection with pilgrimage in his short article on "Holy Places" in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Having described the visit to Jerusalem in A.D. 326 of Helena, mother of Constantine the Great and rediscoverer of those Holy Places, he remarks that "the stream of pilgrimage to the Holy Land began immediately and has followed ever since."⁴

At all times, some of the pilgrims — if only a comparatively small number — stayed in the country to live and die here as ascetics, often in appalling conditions. Such ascetics were in all periods present in the Holy Land, which makes us aware of two important facts concerning the Church here. First, that there always was Christian immigration, albeit often on a very limited scale. Second, that at any given time since Helena, if not earlier, the "local Church" in the Holy Land always consisted of both foreign immigrants and natives, with

2. Ep. 2, Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 46, col. 1013.

3. Ep. 58, Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 22, col. 581–82.

4. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, vol. 17 of the 1954 edition, pp. 135–36 (within the entry on "Palestine"). On the history of Christian pilgrimage, theological criticisms of it, and its significance also in recent times, see the book of J.G. Davies, Emeritus Professor of Theology at the University of Birmingham, *Pilgrimage Yesterday and Today* (London, 1988).

many natives clearly descended from former immigrants. Thus a rigid distinction between natives and immigrants ignores the fact that both elements have long played an essential role in maintaining the Christian presence.

The name “the Holy Land,” and the idea it expresses, is by no means a recent invention. Nevertheless, in view of the resistance to it in certain circles, it is well worth taking up the issue at this point of time and examining the questions: Why is this particular country known to a major part of humanity as “the Holy Land”? Who calls it so? What is meant by the word “holy” in this context? When is it appropriate to use the name — and is it at all important to adhere to it?

Why is the Land Called “Holy”?

It is called this by Christians because it has been selected by God as the meeting place between the divine and the human, where the work of His covenant — the old and the new — was to be carried out. Jews would give a similar answer, although the specific implications would not be the same.

In Christendom, there are other places termed “holy,” such as “the Holy Mountain” (Mount Athos) or “the Holy Island” (Lindisfarne), both so called because of their monastic presence. There are many more centers of pilgrimage, but all these, in comparison with the Holy Land, are like the moon in comparison with the sun. As the moon gets its light from the sun, so do all those other holy places derive their sacredness from what happened in the Holy Land.

Who Calls the Land “Holy”?

It is the Christians above all who explicitly call this particular country holy in its entirety. Although Storrs⁵ and others quite rightly point out that it is holy to Jews and Muslims as well, their religions put more emphasis on the “holy places” in it. Indeed, it is rather they than the Christians who “invented” the idea of holy places. It has already been recalled that Mecca is holy to Muslims and their center of pilgrimage above all others. In Judaism, the term “the holy Land” is rarely used. It is rather Jerusalem that is called “holy” (*qodesh*) in Holy Scripture, as in Joel 4:17: “Then shall you know that I am the Lord your God, dwelling in Zion, My holy mountain; then Jerusalem shall be holy...” The expression “My holy mountain (*har qodsbi*) in that verse is indeed used very frequently in the Old Testament.⁶

A verse which might be thought to refer to the entire country as holy is Joshua 5:15, where Joshua has entered the Promised Land and stands close to Jericho after having celebrated Passover with the corn of the Land of Canaan in Gilgal: “And the captain of the Lord’s host said to Joshua, ‘Loose thy shoe from off thy foot; for the place whereon thou standest is holy,’ and Joshua did so.” However, the wording of the command given to Joshua has the same form

5. See previous note.

6. For example, Is. 11:9; 56:7; 57:13; 65:11,25; 66:20 (*al har-qodsbi Yerushalayim*); Ezek. 20:40; Joel 2:1; Ob. 16; Zeph. 3:11; Ps. 2:6; 89:21.

as such commands elsewhere (e.g., Moses at the burning bush), where the holiness seems to be ascribed only to the particular place.

It is, of course, true that Christians also speak of “holy places” within the country. A common Danish expression is *og sa troede vi, at den Hellige Grav var vel forvaret* (“and then we believed that the Holy Sepulcher was well preserved”) — obviously a remnant in the Danish language from the time of the Crusaders. But from that same time dates the Franciscan *Custodia Terrae Sanctae*, the “Custody of the Holy Land” — and certainly not only of the Holy Sepulcher.⁷

The Greeks, indeed, speak more of “Holy Zion” and the holy places than of the Holy Land. However, the Ethiopians use the term *qedest agar* (“holy land”) more than any other name in connection with the country. They have even gone so far as to call all their ascetics who live there *qeddusan* (“saints” or rather “holy ones”). The term has nothing to do with the moral qualities of the bearers of that title, but only with the fact that they live in the Holy Land. The Ethiopian cemetery at Bethany and the adjacent monastery are consequently called *meskaba qeddusan* — “the resting place of the holy ones.”

That the title is independent of the moral character of the *qeddusan* becomes clear when we read the records of the decisions of the Ethiopian community of Jerusalem in the Middle Ages. Among those decisions is how to proceed if one of these “holy ones” should revile the abbot!

What is Meant by “Holy” in This Context?

When Moses saw the burning bush in the desert, he turned aside to see why the bush was not consumed by the fire:

And when the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the midst of the bush, and said, “Moses, Moses.” And he said, “Here am I.” And He said, “Draw not near here: loose thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.” (Ex. 3:4-5)

Why was that ground — somewhere in the Sinai desert — holy? Hardly because the few people who lived there were so. The desert has always been a refuge of extremists: saints and criminals. When the people of Israel were required to spend forty years in the desert, it was not because of their holiness, but rather because they were in need of purification before they were allowed to enter the Promised Land. According to the Midrash, which is given authoritative confirmation by Maimonides, only the tribe of Levi did not sink into idol worship during the slavery of Israel in Egypt.

The place toward which Moses was drawing near was holy for one reason only: because God was revealing Himself exactly there. **God** hallowed it — not the human merits of any inhabitant. The same is the case with the Holy Land.

Accordingly, to say that the Land is now “unholy” or “getting less and less holy” is, first of all, a total misunderstanding of the character of its holiness. But it also reveals an astonishing ignorance of history — if not a quite as astonishing amount of hypocrisy. Even in a human moral sense, was the Land

7. The Franciscans were nominated custodians of the holy places by Pope Gregory IX of Rome in A.D. 1230.

more “holy” at the time of the Persian invasion in 614, or of the battle at the Yarmuk, or during the bloody wars between various Muslim dynasties, or when the Church of the Holy Sepulcher was destroyed in 1008 A.D., or when the Crusaders massacred “unbelievers” and threw oriental believers out of the Holy Sepulcher, or during the war of the Ottoman conquest? In any of those periods, and one could multiply the examples, was the behavior of its inhabitants more “holy” than it is in our own troubled times?

When Is the Term “the Holy Land” Appropriate?

As an anonymous contributor states in the above mentioned article on Palestine in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*:

There is no ancient geographical term that covers all the area now known as Palestine. Until the period of the Roman occupation the region was subdivided into independent provinces or kingdoms, different at different times (such as Philistia, Canaan, Judah, Israel, Bashan, etc.), but never united under one collective designation. The extension of the name of Palestine beyond the limits of Philistia proper is not older than the Byzantine period. The country is at present (1929) divided into two districts: Jerusalem — southern, and Haifa — northern.⁸

If Helena had been in need of a visa in the year 326, she would probably have requested it from the Roman governor of the province of Syria. Queen Bodil of Denmark was welcomed by the royal court of Jerusalem in 1104, but St. Birgitta of Sweden had to pay her taxes to the Saracene authorities at the Jaffa gate in 1372. St. Ignatius of Loyola paid his taxes to the Ottoman Turks when he was visiting Jerusalem in the Ottoman province of Damascus. Common to all of them was that they came for no other reason but to visit the Holy Land. It would have been quite absurd to demand that they should have refrained from using that name, purporting instead to be engaged in a tourist trip to the province of Syria, the kingdom of Jerusalem, the Mamluke or the Ottoman empire, in order not to offend anybody in any of those states!

But is it at all important to adhere to that ancient name which bypasses all the local political arrangements and aspirations? Yes, it is indeed. This is not because the name expresses or proves any Christian claim to the country — at least not a political claim. Christians were commanded to “go out and make disciples of all the nations” (Mt. 28:19), to “go out into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature” (Mk. 16:15), to be “witnesses” of Jesus Christ “to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Obviously, all the nations of the world are not required to take up residence in the Holy Land, or to exercise political sovereignty anywhere other than in their own lands.

Christianity can live and thrive very well outside the Holy Land. Even rabbinic Judaism, by the way, can successfully establish itself elsewhere, for otherwise that particular branch of the religion based on the Bible would hardly have survived until today.

Nevertheless, both Judaism and Christianity are **historical** religions, not mythical or philosophical systems. Therefore they are also **geographically** rooted in one specific place. And that happens to be **the same place!**

8. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, vol. 17 of the 1954 edition, p. 118.

It is important for both of them to remember and stay in contact with this place, in order not to disappear into the realm of mythology. Much as they have to share the major part of the Bible — whether they like it or not — they also have to share their place of origin.

It is only fortunate that one of them, Christianity, has no need or requirement to lay political claims to that place, as long as its spiritual needs are adequately provided for, and its ancient rights not curtailed.

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