

ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTION

JERUSALEM: CONFRONTATION AND CHALLENGE -

A LETTER TO DR. DAVID HARTMAN

by

Revd. Dr. Wolfgang Pax

Dear Dr. Hartman,

I would like to thank you for the beautiful article, *Jerusalem: Confrontation and Challenge*, which you wrote for our journal. Far from being academically cold and distant, it was written with heartfelt warmth behind which one can feel the presence of an exceptional personality, and in the scientific world it is not often that one comes across an attitude of this kind. Belief must be respected, and one does not argue with it even when one does not agree on all aspects. But that is secondary. Our common ground is of far greater importance, and that is our love for Jerusalem. We are grateful for a gift which enriches and which reveals new dimensions, one that shows up various problems with which I myself as a Christian am grappling. To listen, to give thanks and to study are biblical attitudes and are the pillars upon which any genuine dialogue must rest.

You are quite right, the Jewish presence is rather a shock for some Christians (though not all), for it throws their previous views off balance. They had believed that Judaism had given way to Christianity, and are now forced to experience a different reality as they find themselves faced with a living unified people. This confuses them, for they are now forced to think about a question that had hardly occurred to them previously, which is - "What does earthly Jerusalem mean to me?" A glance at the reference books and dictionaries is enough to show that Jerusalem has been dealt with extensively in the fields of history and archaeology but that the religious aspect has been totally overlooked. Whether they want to or not, Christians must now cope with this question, and it is the Jews who are obliging them to do this.

I am writing this response as a *letter* not for its literary form but because I wish to answer you in the same spirit in which you wrote. The form of the letter dictates its content; it is a confrontation between men, which of course ought to be self-evident for men of the Bible. I choose this form because I want to speak about Jerusalem from the Christian point of view on the *human level*, since this is the only way in which Jerusalem can be discussed, and where possible I shall avoid the words *Judaism* and

*Christianity*. They are abstract concepts, and I doubt very much whether they exist. There are only Jewish, Christian and Muslim people.

*Theology* deals with "Judaism and Christianity"; consequently I need say little about that. Theology is important in Christian thought and very early came under the influence of Aristotelian-scholastic philosophy. Theology is necessary for precise definitions; it belongs to the area of biblical "order". Theology examines in depth. By studying individual aspects, the whole question is clarified, for God reveals himself in every detail. There are many unclear aspects, however. At times a certain school of thought seems "more Papal than the Pope"; that is to say, one has the impression that a universal Christian truth is being pronounced when in fact it is only the opinion of a single individual school of thought, and we are then faced with the danger that both in the field of instruction, and from the pulpit, these things are not clearly differentiated. As Gershom Scholem once put it, theology abounds in the "salon" and does not go down into the cellar, so that life in its vibrance does not receive answers to its urgent questions, for it remains in the academic sphere and has lost contact with live people. Moreover, theology cannot solve everything. It can reach a certain point with the intellect but then has to "change over" and proceed on another level where the heart takes over. There are quite a number of clever theologians who are irreligious, and there are a great number of simple believers who know little of advanced theology but who have a deep understanding of the Bible's message, as is evident from all those ordinary people whose names appear in the scroll of the Righteous Gentiles at Yad Vashem. And so I would request you - don't be blinded by our theologians, as though they alone were definitive. The simple believers frequently know much better, even if they cannot express it in a learned manner. They are deeply concerned over the Christian viewpoint regarding Jerusalem. However, I know your difficulties, for theological books are frequently one's only contact with Christianity.

*Tension between Christians and Jews* regarding Jerusalem surely has its roots in theology. But let us not forget that there are other voices, such as that of Paul when describing the olive tree whose branches are cut off and whose newly grafted branches take sustenance from the old roots (Romans chs. 9-11). Confrontation with Judaism is now forcing theology to rethink its old stand. The pronouncement of the Second Vatican Council and the most recent document concerning mutual relations between Christians and Jews are only a hopeful beginning. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that the door is now definitely open and that it is only a matter of time before relations become normalised, as some ecumenists seem to believe. There is another barrier which has yet to be overcome; that of the ghetto mentality, in the broadest meaning of the term. Strangely enough, this has gone relatively unnoticed, although psychologically and sociologically

It is of vital importance if Jews and Christians are to live together. It is natural for a family, clan or nation to form a closed unit on account of its traditions, and this then serves to separate the group from the rest of the world. In times of persecution, Orthodox Jews, conservative Christians and faithful Muslims protected that which was precious to them within family tradition and family liturgy. The stranger, the "other", thereby stands on the other side of the spiritual wall, outside the door, and the question then arises of what contact there can be. This is all the more difficult when living within the same area, as is the case in Jerusalem. For the "other" is always a puzzling enigma and a cause of fear and insecurity. Differences of language or race are not nearly such powerful factors as separation by religion. Those "serving other gods" are unclean and they are labelled "heathen" or "Jud" (Jew). They are avoided, demonstrating that one wants nothing to do with them – and in the end we have hatred and enmity with all their consequences. These things are frequently explained away as "harmless" antipathy or antisemitism etc., when in reality the core of these phenomena is hatred.

There are ways, however, of overcoming the negative aspects of the ghetto mentality without resorting to dishonest means of persuasion, and without giving up one's own viewpoint. The differences remain but the enmity must cease. This can only happen if one repudiates stereotyped thinking and adopts a new direction of thought. One of my most exciting experiences occurred on the eve of Yom Kippur in the Bukharian synagogue when the youths flagellated themselves for crimes committed against their neighbour; or towards evening on Yom Kippur itself when the men, wearing white in remembrance of death, acknowledge their sins including the bottomless pit of hatred that constantly manifests itself in innumerable forms and which is in fact the cause of all tension. It is a Jewish characteristic to be totally honest with oneself, and to do so in public. Together with the others, I sat on a wooden bench in the synagogue and, leafing through the Book of Leviticus, I came across the words, "You shall not hate your brother in your heart" (19:17), and I remembered what Herman Cohen wrote about this text in his book on hatred. He said that hatred is cancelled out by the use of the words "brother" and "heart", for the man you wish to hate is indeed your brother, and if you wish to hate you are misusing your heart which is meant for life. Jesus gave this a universal meaning in his Sermon on the Mount when he spoke of loving one's enemies. Thus Jerusalem, where people live in such a confined space with the "other", will become the *place of return*.

And now the way is clear and we can see the other with different eyes, and we can respect and value him; for was not he also created by God? When we look at *creation*, at the variety of nature in this country, which is so often praised in the Psalms, then we see him in a different

light. It is possible that the gap between science and Christian theology, which has developed in the past century, has diminished our feeling for natural beauty.

Oriental *hospitality* breaks down the walls of the ghetto when, during the holidays, doors in Jerusalem stand open and the "other" is able to walk in. Of course, these moments are limited in duration and extent, and then the guest returns to the shadows again, and guest and enemy are at times almost interchangeable. But I think of Psalm 23, in which God prepares our table in the midst of the wilderness, and we can say "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life" (Ps. 23:6).

It is easy to reach Jerusalem by modern transport, but we change our environment without changing our spiritual approach. But, in truth, it is hard to reach Jerusalem. One has to find one's way through a wilderness. We can only go up to Jerusalem after we have cleared up one-sided theology, broken down the barriers of our own inner ghetto and undergone a conversion of the heart. This is a *holy city* from the outset. It does not lie on a trade route nor does it have a commercial hinterland. Its very roots are religious. There are points which recur in all religions which can be called basic human and religious issues. The holy cities belong in this category. They rise beyond their surroundings, and yet through travellers and pilgrims remain in close contact with them. They are dedicated to God and they assume special meaning for particular groups of people. Jerusalem is exceptional, however. Unlike Rome or Mecca or Benares, which are holy to one religion, Jerusalem is holy to three. And it is holy because the Holy One in his inscrutable wisdom, broke in here to teach his message to the people. We Christians speak of holy places; but these are not individual places of worship. They are the entire city of Jerusalem, for the parts stand for the whole and the whole is diffused in its parts. When I walk through the city, going from place to place, the dust seems to vibrate because the Lord walked over it, and every stone echoes with his words. And Jerusalem represents the whole country, where all the holy places are scattered, not as isolated holy places but as landmarks in the entire holy area.

The *holy* is that which is "other" and at the same time that which is near. For me, there is nothing "new" or "old". I find the old excitingly new and the new excitingly old. Neither do I care to differentiate as to whether my neighbour the "other" has been here longer than myself, since for him I am that "other" and God loves equally the proselyte, the one who "joins"; and for him a thousand years are as one. Sometimes I walk in the footsteps of the Lord on the Mount of Olives, overlooking the walls of the city which seem so petrified and yet are so alive. Or I stand on a corner in the Old City where scores of little boys mill around and the sounds of the bazaar surround me, and I read a passage about the "heavenly Jerusalem". And I do this intentionally, here in the midst of the noise and the

bustle. The fact that the word *Jerusalem* is the same in abstract thought as it is in the daily reality demonstrates to me that I am doing the right thing. When I read all the epithets used to describe the city's beauty, I find that the symbolic descriptions are purely and simply meant for that which is indescribably holy and for that which one can only approach and never totally unveil. A text of this kind is like a piece of music with a single motif that is constantly repeated. One must not make the logical differentiation between the natural and the supernatural, or between the spiritual and the material. These differentiations do not exist in eastern thought, and to make them would be erroneous, for the holy knows no barriers. For the Muslims too, the earthly Ka'aba can exist beneath the celestial one. However, many Christians forget about Jerusalem on earth when thinking about the romantic heavenly one.

For the holy has been placed within an *unholy* world. Sometimes I stand within the Damascus Gate and watch the people go by – Bedouin women, religious Jews, Armenians, Abyssinians, Greeks, Italians, Franciscans, housewives from the new city, young people from the kibbutzim, Arab boys and tourists from many countries. I look at their faces and I see how many young people have aged faces with shadows under their eyes, and I see the tired, sad faces which are living proof of how difficult life is in this country and how hard they have to work; I see the personal suffering connected with this city. Sometimes I sit amid the ruins of Bethesda where, according to St. John, the sick came to find healing in the pool, and where the Lord healed a man who had sought help for thirty-eight years. Then I realise the truth about Jerusalem. It is a symbol of man's suffering and at the same time of the joyful word of God. It tells us that the purpose of our lives is not resignation, bitterness and pessimism, but that the Holy One is there in the depths of the darkness, holding out his hand to us. And then too I understand why so many pilgrims have come to Jerusalem throughout the ages. The ordinary people bear witness to the holiness of Jerusalem. Simple Jews who pray at the Kotel (Western Wall) and who thrust their written petitions into its cracks, oriental Christians who constantly throng their holy places during their holidays, pilgrims to Mecca who used to park their old-fashioned buses outside St. Stephen's Gate and who filled the mosques by day and night, and western tourists, perhaps only on a sightseeing tour, who suddenly become quiet and thoughtful because it is all so different from that to which they are accustomed: these people do not only seek historical memories or withdrawal from the world through liturgical observance, but each one in his own way seeks the realm of that which is holy and from which emanates the dynamic quality with which they wish to build their lives and the lives of those near to them, be it those who have the good fortune to live in the country itself or those who as messengers of Jerusalem then return to their distant lands. Thus the *Pe-*

*regrinus*, a Latin word meaning the "other", becomes the pilgrim who meets others in the city of Jerusalem and lives there together with them. Then one can understand the Syrian theologian Ephraim of the fourth century, according to whom God placed Jerusalem in the centre of the world so that the whole of creation might see it.

A great deal is said about Jerusalem, but its *holy aspect* is frequently overlooked. Towards the end of his life, the Jewish sociologist Max Horkheimer surprised his revolutionary-minded students by saying, "If there is no God the Father, why must I be good?" All efforts regarding Jerusalem will remain fragmentary if people are not mindful of the religious side of their existence, many of whose roots lie in this city. When I was a young boy, I was once in the Polish village of Stuny, not far from Wroclaw. There I met an old Jew, whom I can see before me to this day. Burdened by years, his eyes reddened by Torah study, with his long beard and his kind smile, he personified the depths of wisdom. He spoke of a yearning for Jerusalem which he had felt all his life. When we parted he took my hand and said in Yiddish, "*Auch du bist einer von unserer Leit*" – you too are one of us. I have never forgotten his words. They contain so much warmth and acceptance. Could they not be used in a wider context to include all people who seek the holy in Jerusalem?

And here I send you my warmest wishes,

Yours sincerely,

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