

Jerusalem in Medieval Christian Thought

by

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Sacred to mankind, Jerusalem in its forty, perhaps fifty, centuries of existence has occupied a unique place in human history. Perhaps more than any other place on earth, Jerusalem has stirred the passions of mankind for as long as history has been recorded, inspiring thinkers, poets, prophets, saints and last but not least warriors and politicians. I plan in the following essay to scan the pages of history in search of the role that the idea of Jerusalem as the City of God has played in the development of Christian eschatological thought during the Middle Ages, particularly as it was reflected in the works of Dante Alighieri and other great writers and thinkers of that period. However, it is important in order to understand the place of Jerusalem in the World scheme set up by Dante Alighieri, on whose *Divine Comedy* we shall focus our attention, to consider the early Christian thinking on Jerusalem as a symbol of new and heavenly things.

In the Old Testament, Jerusalem is presented as the place where God chose to establish his special relationship with the Jewish people (*Psalms* 78: 68ff).¹ They could find fellowship with Him in prayer, praise and sacrifice in the Temple. God's presence there made the city holy. The holiness of the place derives, according to *Joel* (4:17), from Jehovah's dwelling in Zion, the holy mountain. The trends of thought generated from the concept of God's presence in Jerusalem centered around the nature of His presence. Are we to understand His presence in Jerusalem as physical or spiritual? Does God physically reside in the temple or does He reside there in a spiritual manner? Is not God's nature and essence spiritual and non-material? Should we not then understand His presence as a spiritual one to effect revelation and redemption for the whole of mankind and not for one nation?

In the prophetic tradition, the dwelling of God is understood as a spiritual one. Yet, in spite of the expressed manner in which Jerusalem was called The Holy City, an element of imperfection remained. The Hebrew prophets looked to a future for the revelation of the holy city where God will dwell with His redeemed people in perfect harmony. The Christian religion, building on this prophetic tradition, distinguished emphatically between an earthly, a heavenly, and a new Jerusalem. Christianity, believing it to be the fulfillment of the Prophets, used the symbolism of Jerusalem to point out its new message and new approach to salvation. But how

¹ All biblical references are to *The Jerusalem Bible*. 167.

does the Christian concept of Jerusalem, Heavenly Jerusalem and New Jerusalem develop and what are its characteristics?

In the New Testament, Jerusalem is basically associated with the passion, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus (*Acts* 2:4-13). It is not a loose association, but one in which the two become inseparable. The Synoptic gospels contain various passages that give Jerusalem a central place in the history of the Messianic suffering and death. Especially in the passages recording and explaining the resolution of Jesus to go to Jerusalem to suffer and die, we encounter the note of purpose, compulsion, and urgency that the Messianic suffering and death must be accomplished specifically at Jerusalem. In Luke's narrative in particular, Jerusalem assumes a decisive importance as the destination of Jesus' last journey and as the necessary place where Christ's death is to take place (chapters 9:51 through 19:44). Luke seems in the "Travel Narrative" to be more keenly interested in the theological implications than in geographical reporting. He seems to have composed the "Travel Narrative" to describe how Jesus started on the road to Jerusalem with clear understanding that His mission included suffering, death, and resurrection. The road to Jerusalem was Christ's path of suffering and at the same time the accomplishment of His redemptive mission. Therefore the significance of the geography was in its theological implications. It was a matter of great significance where Jesus suffered, died, was buried, and rose again. His sacrifice made sense and was effective only in Jerusalem (*Mark* 10:33f). By going to Jerusalem, Jesus was fulfilling the prophecies of the Old Testament and ushering the new kingdom, the Kingdom of the promised Messiah. There, at Jerusalem the center of Old Testament Jewish faith, He confronted the two theocratic institutions: the Priests as functionaries of the cult (*Luke* 19:45ff), and the Scribes as keepers of the Mosaic Tradition (*Matthew* 23:37ff). Paradoxically, Jesus laments at the end of His journey that the Holy City, beloved by God and favored with the Messianic visitation, was on the brink of disaster, for she would not recognize Him. Because of her sin in failing to recognize the presence of the Messianic salvation in Jesus Christ, the earthly city has been rejected, man's hope for salvation should no longer be fixed on this earthly city or any other earthly city for the Kingdom of God is not of this world. There is a heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God, where Jesus sits as the mediator of a new covenant (*Hebrews* 12:22-25), where there is no temple (*Revelation* 21:22). The Lord God the Almighty is its temple and God fills the whole Universe, the world and man are the temple, God's house is without bounds. Obviously this last idea of man's heart being the temple of God takes us away from the notion that earthly Jerusalem and the Temple are shadows or at best counterparts of the heavenly city, and introduces the idea of an intimate and individual relationship with God. The Kingdom of God, although not of this world, may nevertheless be established in this world in the hearts of men.

The new emphasis on the heavenly city and the spirituality of the Divine presence in man brought forth the salient feature of the Christian concepts of universalism and freedom. As a place of prayer the physical temple itself does not offer anything to God, consequently it should be open and welcome to all men in whose hearts God may reside. It is his faith and not the cult

or the adherence to legality that redeems man. Equally by placing the emphasis on the heavenly city, Christianity brought forth a new concept of freedom built on the emancipation from the laws that bind man to the flesh. This concept of freedom is nowhere more clear than in *Galatians* 4:26 in the form of the allegory of the two women. The two women stand for the two covenants, for two Jerusalems. One is from Mount Sinai, and brought forth children to slavery, but the second, Jerusalem on High, is freeborn, and it is she who is *the mother of Christians*. The indication that this heavenly reality has the name Jerusalem simply means that the metaphor of the heavenly spiritual community of fellowship between God and His people came to realization within the religious community of which the earthly Jerusalem was the center. However, one should not understand in this context that geographic Jerusalem is in slavery with her children but it is the old covenant, the old law that is in slavery. Human freedom does not exactly mean independence or self-sufficiency. Real freedom is the work of God who through the Holy Spirit provides man with his freedom.

Paul the Apostle was perhaps the single most important person to develop and elaborate this concept of Christian freedom. He even couched it in political terms current at his time. The thrust of Paul's thoughts, however, is directed to the heavenly Jerusalem. This Jerusalem of which the Christian is a "citizen" has no man-made foundations, no spatially defined limits. Its builder and its architect is God (*Hebrews* 11:10) and its "citizenship" is won not through birth or naturalization, but through faith. Jewish eschatology, although conceiving of a heavenly Jerusalem, and an earthly Jerusalem which was a copy of the first, remained associated with the Temple and with a national revival. But according to St. Paul, enrolment in the heavenly city is direct and personal. In this heavenly Jerusalem "where the millions of angels have gathered for the festival, with the whole Church in which everyone is a first-born son and a citizen of heaven", the blessed people, the saved ones, live in the most glorious company. However, each saved Christian has his individual citizenship in the heavenly city. His heavenly citizenship stands in contradiction to that of the Jew who finds his governing and binding relation in the earthly city. In addition to heavenly Jerusalem, the book of *Revelation* (21:11ff) speaks of a new Jerusalem which is actually a metaphorical figure used to describe the bliss of the redeemed community in the presence of God. Revelation refers to this Jerusalem as a holy city "coming down from God out of heaven, as beautiful as a bride all dressed for her husband". In this city, God lives among men and He will wipe away all tears from their eyes, there will be no more death, and no more mourning or sadness. This last thought of a heavenly city which descends to become the new consummation city is distinctively New Testament doctrine.

In sum, Jerusalem of the New Testament is the symbol of the New Covenant, new citizenship, a citizenship that is universal and not national, spiritual and not materially rooted. It is based on faith and provides the individual direct access to and relationship with his Creator. Heavenly Jerusalem is then seen as the culmination of the Church in its fullest perfection. When the final consummation occurs, Heavenly Jerusalem becomes New Jerusalem—the final abode of the blessed.

The above is the theological framework in which Jerusalem, The City of God, the heavenly city, was conceived. However, earthly Jerusalem was for most, if not all, Christians no less significant and important. Jerusalem was the seat where redemption took place through the sacrificial drama of Christ's crucifixion. The importance of earthly Jerusalem was not then forsaken for the heavenly one. The headquarters of the organized Church, yes, moved to Rome and Constantinople, yet the Christian popular, as well as the theological, mind kept focusing on the earthly so much that this was one of the major reasons, if not the primary one, for the Crusades.

Shortly after the crucifixion took place, the Romans destroyed the Temple and the rest of Jerusalem. To the Christian, that seemed to be the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophetic message that earthly Jerusalem is the evil city that kills the messengers of God and will be destroyed because of that and because its inhabitants have not wanted to be gathered (Matthew 23:37ff). The destruction of the Temple gave the Christians reassurance that it was a just retribution for the crucifixion of Jesus. As a result of Jerusalem's fall, Christians definitely cast their lot with the world that lay outside Judaism, a religion which at the time seemed to most of them to have become meaningless.

The rebuilding of Jerusalem by the Romans as Aelia Capitolina did not affect the attitude of the Christians. The early Christians, however, transferred the name of Mount Zion from the Temple Mount to the hill that is today called Mount Zion, the place where Jesus had gathered with his disciples at the Last Supper. For a few centuries Jerusalem had only a small number of Christians. Christianity spread all over the Near East and Europe. Antioch and its patriarchate, until it was overshadowed by Rome, was the leading Christian city in the East. But as the years went by, Jerusalem regained more and more importance. By 431 it became a patriarchate and its bishop claimed primacy over the Patriarch of Antioch.

Because it was the place where the redemptive drama of Jesus Christ took place, Jerusalem became the greatest attraction to Christians. Moreover, there soon arose a feeling that the martyrs, when suffering for the faith, were able to grant a special remission of sins; and gradually it was believed that the spot where a martyrdom had occurred acquired something of the remissory power. Pilgrims from all over began arriving in the city. The first pious "guidebook" written by Sextus Julius Africanus early in the third century describes sites in Jerusalem and Palestine mentioned in the Gospels. Enthusiastic churchmen and pilgrims attempted to follow the path of Jesus in the city, among them the Alexandrian philosopher Origen who journeyed to Palestine to "find the vestiges of Jesus, his disciples and prophets".² Through the efforts of these early pilgrims, the Christian sacred places were identified and have since attracted the veneration of the Christian faithful. Together with pilgrims, the idea of collecting relics of Jesus, His

² Robert Somerville, ed., *Decreta Claromontenria*, Vol. 1 of *The Councils of Urban II (Annuaireum historiae Conciliorum, Supplementum)* (Amsterdam: Haddert, 1972), p. 74.

disciples and the saints began to take hold. Empress Helena, after the triumph of Christianity as an officially accepted religion, came to Palestine and built the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem and the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. Throughout the following centuries and until the Arab conquest of *Bilād al-Shām* and Egypt, the pilgrim traffic kept up a heavy pace. Many of the fathers of the Church, basing their thoughts on the superior importance of a heavenly Jerusalem, considered pilgrims and relics of little value, but the popular mind was captivated and driven to venerate Jerusalem and its sites by a combination of devotion and hope. By the time of the first Crusade, Jerusalem had acquired a legendary and mystical significance in Europe and possessed the strange and unique virtue of being at once a place which really existed on earth and a symbol of the city that existed in heaven. Perhaps, because of the distances in those days, Jerusalem remained a remote spot on the map of the earth where only a few people could go, but Jerusalem as a symbol was in the heart of every faithful monotheist.

An eleventh-century clerk, describing the various shrines of Palestine for pilgrims (*Itineraria Hierosolymitana*), warns his readers that Jerusalem was not exceptionally large and wealthy, it was just a town like any other. But it was not the geography which inspired the Crusaders in their vocation and made the crowds cry out, “God wills it”. Zoé Oldenbourg in her famous work on the Crusades states, “If there was an element of collective hysteria behind the phenomenon of the Crusade, it was provoked by an involuntary confusion between the elements of time and eternity, between the earthly and the heavenly Jerusalem” (p. 43). By conquering Jerusalem, the Crusaders believed they were in heaven.

When the first Crusades took place, Christianity in the West had suffered many changes. Gregory the Seventh, who was pope between 1073 and 1085, had added a new dimension to the idea of *militia Christi*—the warfare of Christ which implied to St. Paul the War against flesh and blood, and to many of the early Christians the *spiritual* combat of the martyr and monk. Gregory took the critical step of proclaiming that earthly warfare could be a part of the warfare of Christ. He furthermore combined this new dimension with the concept of the remission of sins which amounted, as far as the knights of that time were concerned, to an offer for the remission of sin through the exercise of war. Urban II in his councils stated that if any man sets out from pure devotion to liberate the Church of God at Jerusalem, his Journey shall be reckoned to him in place of all penance.³

The knights consequently considered themselves God’s vessels. Warriors themselves, they thought of Christ as Warrior, rather than as a shepherd as earlier and later Christians were likely to do; and they thought of themselves as his army. And although they knew they might die in battle, they expected their Lord would reward their devotion by bringing them to Jerusalem, which Jerusalem it was most of them neither knew nor cared to know. For they had little capacity

³ *The Works of Origen in Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 14, no. 269, commentary on John.

for differentiating between the Jerusalem at the center of the earth and the new Jerusalem at the center of heaven.

This confusion between earthly and heavenly Jerusalem remained throughout the Crusades. When these ended, or were about to end, Dante Alighieri came on the scene of literary and religious Europe. In the following we shall try to lay out and explain his concept and vision of Jerusalem.

The Divine Comedy may be truly considered a summation of medieval thought and life. It is a grandiose monument of the Middle Ages pointing towards the Renaissance. In it one is likely to find a strong reflection of the culture, religion, philosophy, and the art of the period. Medieval Western society with its lofty aspirations, denigrating prejudices and burgeoning scientific knowledge is truth-fully reflected. In addition to that, the *Comedy* is a great poem of sin, reparation, redemption and beatitude, symbolizing the allegory of the human soul which from error and ignorance can reach the highest degree of perfection—contemplation of God.

Divided into three parts, *The Divine Comedy* is projected against the background of the World of the Beyond. Following the Christian Catholic belief in hell, purgatory and Paradise, the poet grafted three Kingdoms in accordance with the belief and based them on the Ptolemaic system. Hell is an enormous conic-shaped chasm, wedged in the Northern Hemisphere between Jerusalem, one of the fixed points of Dante's world, and the center of the earth. Purgatory has the form of a very high mountain situated in the Southern Hemisphere where, according to tradition, the Earthly Paradise was believed to have been located. Paradise is circular in shape and is formed by celestial spheres of the Moon, Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, all of which enclose hell and purgatory in their circular motion. The Starry Heaven, the Crystalline Heaven and the Empyrean are placed horizontally over them. Here the spirits of the blessed are visible, and divine harmonies fill the air.

Dante's poem is a vast tale in which an imaginary journey through the three Kingdoms of the Beyond is dramatically related. It is an allegory of mankind's journey, as by its merits and demerits it accrues for itself the rewards or punishment of Justice. Hell is the reflection of the world of nature with all the tendencies that lead man to evil and perdition. Purgatory is the world of purification. Paradise is the world of freedom as a means of reaching perfect happiness in God. The central and essential theme developed is therefore the passing of man, represented by Dante, from the state of pure instinct and sin to that of one who feels the impact of spiritual and intellectual values culminating in the greatest of man's activities—the contemplation of God achieved by love and faith.

The cultural influences in the *Comedy* are many and deep: classical literature, philosophy, the sciences and literatures of the Arabs and Muslims, and especially the Bible and the Catholic Church. It is surprising, therefore, to find that many aspects of the Paradise as Dante depicts them are based not only on Paul's concept of Heavenly Jerusalem and John's New Jerusalem, but also the various religious and cultural influences of his era.

Dante mentions Jerusalem only a few times. However, Earthly Jerusalem is a fixed and most conspicuous point in his geographic scheme of the World. The first mention is made in *Inferno*, Canto 34, v. 114, as the poet and his guide Virgil pass the center of the earth which is the center of gravity. At that point they begin climbing and Lucifer appears to them upside down. An hour or so later the time changes from Friday evening to Saturday morning. Dante wants to know why Satan appears upside down now, and how it is that, having started their descent in the early evening, they have after one hour and a half of climbing arrived at the following morning. Virgil explains that having passed the Center, they are now in the Southern Hemisphere, so that “up” and “down” are reversed, and second they are now going by southern time, so that day and night are reversed. Purgatory stands on the opposite meridian to Jerusalem; therefore Purgatory time is 12 hours behind Jerusalem time. However, more important than the location is the way Dante refers to Jerusalem as the place under whose meridian He (Jesus) came to die. The centrality of Jerusalem is then not physical but religious. It is the place where according to Christianity redemption took place. The fact that Jerusalem was considered the navel or center of the earth was not, as we have seen, novel with Dante. But Dante is reflecting herein the physical and spiritual centrality of Jerusalem to the Christian faith. If we are to accept this interpretation, the focal point of Jerusalem refutes the claims of those scholars who maintain that in the Middle Ages and at other times Bethlehem, and not Jerusalem, was and is the most important city in the Christian geography of holiness.

In the *Purgatory*, Jerusalem is mentioned four times in Cantos II, 3; IV, 68; XXIII, 29; and XXVII, 2. In Canto II, Dante only describes how, when it is sunset at Jerusalem (in the Northern Hemisphere where the dry land exists) it is sunrise in Purgatory at the antipodes. The Ganges in India is taken as lying on the eastern horizon of Jerusalem, and the Pillars of Hercules on the Western. In Canto IV again Jerusalem (Zion) is mentioned as being at the exact antipodes of the Purgatory. In Canto XXIII, Jerusalem is mentioned in relation with the siege of Jerusalem by Titus and the famine in the city was so great that a Jewess called Miriam killed and ate her own child. In Canto XXVII, Jerusalem is referred to as “The City where his Maker shed His blood”. However, the most direct reference to heavenly Jerusalem comes in *Paradise*, Canto XXV, 56:

Hence, leave to come from Egypt he has won
To see Jerusalem, though many a year
His soldiering on earth has yet to run.

In scripture, Egypt is symbolical of life on earth, Jerusalem of eternal life in heaven. Dante refers to Jerusalem in his other writings, but what is most important is to find out if there is any relationship between his vision of the centrality of earthly Jerusalem and the early Christian concept of New Jerusalem.

The distance in time that separates Dante from St. Paul is wide and is filled by the huge accumulations of doctrines elaborated by the Church during almost thirteen centuries. Dante

conceives of heaven in terms of the awards accrued by the Christian culture during the Medieval period. The Empyrean heaven which lies beyond and outside of all the other heavens is an incorporeal and motionless heaven, where neither time nor place, but light (*Paradiso* XXIII, 106-20; XXX, 39) exists. This is the special abode of God and the resting place of the Saints. The latter are arranged in the form of the petals of a white rose, and gaze upon the beatific vision of God, who is surrounded by the nine orders of the three Angelic Hierarchies. The Empyrean heaven is representative of the Divine Science, in addition to being the abode of God and of the spirits of the blessed. Although Dante has used in his description of the Empyrean heaven physical images, as though to reaffirm the eternal relationship of the physical and the spiritual in the Divine presence, the basic elements in this heaven are eternity and the harmonious union between God and the Blessed ones, the redeemed people. This is exactly the concept of New Jerusalem in which the people of God dwell with Him. One needs to go here into a discussion of the above concepts and their meaning to bring out the similarities between, especially, John's and Dante's visions. However, what we pretend to convey is that the Empyrean heaven in Dante is greatly inspired by the heavenly and new Jerusalems of St. Paul and St. John, to which is added the scientific, philosophical and moral teachings that accumulated during the thirteen centuries that separate Dante from Paul and John. All three portray the place as a dwelling with God in perfect harmony and the eternal knowledge that comes from the beatific vision. The citizenship of which St. Paul speaks is the reality of God's fellowship with the community of the blessed. Both Dante and St. Paul see the essence of existence in the final fellowship of the believer with his God. The Empyrean heaven and the heavenly Jerusalem signify the ultimate in the realm of spiritual fellowship with God, and the realization of fellowship in the dwelling of the blessed community in the presence of God.

In conclusion, the concept of Jerusalem in Medieval Christian thought leads us to a new vision of reality which expresses the complexity of that vision and distinguishes the Jewish from the Christian vision inasmuch as the first was limited in scope whereas the Christian was universal and ushered in with it the beginning of a new community of believers, a new *Ecclesia* which is open to all mankind.

(Original editorial inclusion that followed the essay:)

All men's thoughts, which are turmoiled with manifold cares, take indeed divers courses, but yet endeavour to attain the same end of happiness, which is that good which, being once obtained, nothing can be further desired. Which is the chiefest of all goods, and containeth in itself whatsoever is good, and if it wanted anything it could not be the chiefest, because there would something remain besides it which might be wished for. Wherefore, it is manifest that blessedness is an estate replenished with all that is good. This, as we said, all men endeavour to obtain by divers ways. For there is naturally ingrafted in men's minds an earnest desire of that which is truly good: but deceitful error withdraweth it to that which falsely seemeth such... Wherefore, since all things are desired in respect of goodness, they are not so much wished for as goodness itself. But we granted that to be blessedness for which other things are desired, wherefore in like manner only blessedness is sought after: by which it plainly appeareth that goodness and blessedness have one and the self-same substance.... But we have showed that God and true blessedness are one and the self-same thing.... We may then securely conclude that the substance of God consisteth in nothing else but in goodness.

Boethius.