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When Jerusalem was not Jerusalem
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It seems hard to imagine, but there was a time when Jerusalem was not Jerusalem. Judaism and Christianity think that Jerusalem has always been there, as part of the world in which God, first in the Old Testament and then in the New Testament, played out the divine drama with his chosen people. Starting with King David's capture of Jerusalem for his capital some 3000 years ago, that city has been at the heart of the Holy Land. But for about 250 years, Jerusalem was a pagan city, where Jews were not allowed even to walk and where Christianity was unable to build a single church.

The Roman Empire annexed Judea and its capital Jerusalem in 63 B.C., and ultimately appointed Herod the Great to rule it for them. Upon Herod's death in 4 B.C., the Romans decided to rule it directly, sending procurators from Rome to serve as governors. These polytheistic procurators were ill-suited to rule a monotheistic country, for they did not grasp its stricter approach to the divine world. They preferred to keep Judea quiet, acquire as much money as they could, and then return to Rome. Combine this approach with a military occupation, rather than a civilian police force, and you have a recipe for disaster.

After much provocation, the Jews revolted against their Roman overlords in 66 A.D., certain they would win their freedom. It did not happen that way. The Roman legions captured Jerusalem and destroyed the city and its temple. Jews were banned from living in Jerusalem and several decades later, after a second failed revolt, they were banned from living anywhere in Judea and from even entering Jerusalem.

But by that time it was no longer even called Jerusalem. It was Aelia Capitolina. The Emperor Hadrian refounded the ruined site as a new colony in 129. He called it Aelia, which was his family name, and Capitolina after the god Jupiter, the chief god of the Roman pantheon.

Quarrying stones from the ruins, the Romans reconstructed the city, shifting it north so that much of the Jewish city of the previous 1000 years was outside the walls. In typical Roman fashion, they built a central, wide street called a "Cardo." The Cardo was lined with shops and served as the city's main shopping and gathering place, and in Jerusalem it split into two branches to follow the contours of its hills.

Ignoring the former temple area completely, the Romans built a forum, a large open square, where the western Cardo met the gate outside where the legions camped. On the north side, a temple to Jupiter, the city's patron deity, was constructed. In this temple, he was accompanied by the goddess Aphrodite.

The Romans even forgot the name Jerusalem. It is clear that by the 200s, the region's Roman governors knew the city only by the name Aelia Capitolina and had no knowledge that it was once called Jerusalem.

But the Jews and the Christians never forgot. When the Emperor Constantine became a Christian, Jerusalem and the Holy Land were among his main thoughts. Shortly after becoming the sole ruler in 324, he established the Christian church as his most favored religion. And, working through the new Bishop of Jerusalem, he rebuilt Jerusalem as the city of God. The bishop identified the Temple of Jupiter as covering the site where Jesus was crucified and buried, and so it was torn down and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher was constructed in its place. Jerusalem became Jerusalem once again.