

Religion Today
March 10-16, 2002
Christianity and the Holy Land
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Nowadays, when someone says, "I went to the Holy Land," we know both who they are and where they went. They are Christians and they went to Israel (and perhaps the few religious sites just over the borders in Egypt or Jordan).

But for nearly three centuries after Jesus' death, it was not that way. The land wasn't holy and there were few Christians in it. By 60 A.D., Christians in Rome and Antioch were more visible than those in Palestine. Indeed, in Rome in 50 A.D., Christians were well-known enough (and sufficiently disliked) to be wrongly blamed by Emperor Nero for a fire that burned much of the city. In Israel itself, modern archaeologists have discovered no remains of churches built prior to 324, and although we know of Christians living in Palestine and even the names of some bishops, there is no evidence of large numbers.

Part of this can be explained by travels of the Paul the Apostle. He went first to Antioch, and while he went west from there into Asia Minor, Greece and ultimately Rome itself, other missionaries went throughout Syria. Building on Paul's influence, Christianity apparently did a better job of gaining adherents in the lands around the eastern Mediterranean in general than in Palestine in particular.

Another probable reason was the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman legions in 70 A.D., after four years of Jewish rebellion against the Empire. Rome banned the Jews from living in Jerusalem and ultimately expelled them from all of Judea. Jerusalem and its Temple were razed, and then blotted out from official memory. A new colony, Aelia Capitolina, was built upon its ruins. This city's primary trinity were of the gods of Rome itself: Jupiter, Roma, and the female deity Aphrodite/Minerva. Temples to these gods were erected in Aelia and it became a pagan city. And so

it remained for more than two centuries, while the name of Jerusalem passed from Roman memory.

It was not until the Emperor Constantine became the sole Roman emperor in 324 and declared his support for Christianity and the church, that matters began to change. At the urging of the bishop of Jerusalem, and over the objections of his superior the bishop of Caesarea, Constantine decided to reclaim Palestine for Christianity by building churches at all the important sites of Jesus' activities and even at some locations of key events of the Old Testament. But Constantine's main interest was in recreating Jerusalem. Not as the Jerusalem of the Jews, but as the Jerusalem of Jesus. Thus the site of Jesus' crucifixion and burial was located, and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre was built. This church soon became the highlight of every Christian's pilgrimage to the Holy Land and has remained so down through the centuries, even under the nearly millennium-long rule of the Muslim Ottoman Empire.

These churches rapidly became attractions for Christian pilgrims from across the Mediterranean world. They came in droves to worship and pray at the sites of Christ's birth, life and death. And many of them stayed in Palestine rather than returning home.

Surprisingly, these Christians settled away from the area where Jesus did most of his missionary work. The Christians settled in villages and built churches in Judea and in western Galilee, while Jesus carried out most of his activities in eastern Galilee around the freshwater Sea of Galilee. So although the Christians wished to live in the Holy Land, few wanted to associate themselves day-in and day-out with the holy sites of Jesus' life. Perhaps that was just too much.