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Creating the Holy Land
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Where did the Christian idea of the Holy Land come from? An initial reaction might be that it came from the Christians of Galilee and Jerusalem who knew Jesus and were present at the events of Jesus' life and ministry. It seems logical, does it not? When we read the gospels, we learn about Jesus and his interactions with the people around him in specific places.

Jesus' teachings changed people at the locations where they heard him, so would they not then revere and commemorate those places?

Logical, yes. Correct? No. It turns out that the Christian Holy Land was created by people who did not live in Palestine/Israel. Furthermore, the Holy Land idea was developed for people who lived outside the land, not those who lived there. This was true not only when the Holy Land was first created but later as well.

When Constantine the Great became emperor of the entire Roman Empire in 324, after more than 12 years of war, he organized the Christian Church. He sponsored the first empire-wide church council at Nicea, in which basic matters of Christian theology were first decided. Building a new imperial capital at Constantinople (now Istanbul in Turkey), he made patriarchs, bishops, and other church leaders key members of his court.

Constantine's mother Helena, a devout Christian, determined that she would travel to Palestine, as it was called then, to identify the sites of events in Jesus' ministry. In Galilee, she located Nazareth, Jesus' childhood home, Cana, where Jesus turned water into wine, and Capernaum, the headquarters of Jesus' ministry. In Bethlehem, she identified the stable where Jesus was born, and in Jerusalem she identified the sites of the events of Jesus' last week of life, including the location of his trial, crucifixion and burial.

In following decades, churches were built on these sites, including the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. As other sites were identified, including ones from the Old Testament, they too received churches, or even monasteries.

Few of the priests and monks who served these sites were local; they came from countries around the Mediterranean Sea. Although a few congregation members came from the local population, the churches served large numbers of pilgrims who came on journeys of weeks or even months. So the Christian Holy Land was created by an outsider, Helena, maintained by the Church outside Palestine, for the benefit of pilgrims who traveled to the Holy Land.

Over the centuries, the church lost control of Palestine, and the church itself splintered, first into Catholic and Orthodox, then into many Protestant denominations. The importance of the geographical Holy Land as a pilgrimage destination was lost. Palestine became a backwater.

In the 19th century, Protestants turned their attention to the Holy Land. The United States in 1830 established an embassy with the Ottoman Empire, which arranged access for Americans interested in traveling to the sites of the Bible. Despite the hardships of desert heat, sand, and dirt, of camping for weeks on end, and even of bandits, an increasing number of Americans, English, and other Europeans came to the Holy Land. They brought their Bibles and traveled to sites where they believed biblical events had taken place.

Before the end of the decade, Edward Robinson, professor of Scripture at Union Seminary, used Arabic town names to identify lost sites such as Eshtemoa and Gibbon, while the artist David Roberts painted scenes of sites well-known from biblical stories, many of which were commemorated by churches or chapels centuries old. Robinson published his research, Roberts his paintings, and other travelers (including Mark Twain) wrote travelogues.

All these excited Protestants and drew more to the region.

One thing eluded Protestants in their rediscovery of the Holy Land; they controlled no site related to Jesus' Passion and resurrection. Centuries earlier, these sites had become worship centers of eastern churches of Christianity, worship quite foreign to Protestant sensibilities.

In 1882, the British General Charles Gordon created a new location for Jesus' crucifixion, Golgotha, by looking out his hotel window and deciding a particular hill looked like a skull (the meaning of Golgotha in Aramaic). Nearby stood an ancient tomb, which Gordon declared was the "Garden Tomb" in which Jesus had been buried. The Anglican Church acquired the property and established it as a Protestant worship site. Although the site has no historical validity, which its own literature recognizes, the site has since become a favorite of Protestant Christians touring Jerusalem because of its western character.

The 19th-century Protestant rediscovery of the Holy Land followed the pattern established by Helena more than a millennium earlier. Christian outsiders came into Palestine/Israel to identify the sites for even more religious travelers from outside the land to visit. The Holy Land of Orthodox and Catholic pilgrims had become a holy tourist destination for Protestant travelers of all stripes.