Religion Today
May 3 – 9, 2009

Meeting God in the Holy Land
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In the early fourth century, Emperor Constantine began transforming the pagan Roman Empire into a Christian empire. A key component of that change focused on Israel, the land of the Bible. Christian leaders, including Constantine's mother, identified the locations of biblical stories from the life of Jesus, the early Church and the Old Testament. At these sites, Christianity built churches and shrines where worshippers could commemorate those sacred events. In this way, the Church transformed the Jewish "Land of Israel" into the Christian "Holy Land."

Through the centuries, Orthodox and Catholic travelers made these churches into pilgrimage destinations. For Orthodox pilgrims, even today, perhaps the primary activity at these churches is the veneration of icons contained in them. These paintings provide the pious a window to the individual portrayed, whether Jesus, Mary, or a saint. As St. Basil of Caesarea observed, "The honor paid to the image passes to the prototype." For the Orthodox, God is made real through the icons, which provide a physical symbol of the divine presence.

While Orthodoxy reveres liturgy, especially during Holy Week, Catholicism has elevated liturgical observance even higher. This is particularly true for pilgrimage in the Holy Land, where the celebration of Mass in the churches at the holy locations constitutes a central activity of pilgrimage. The divine presence in the Mass's bread and wine, as Catholics believe, assures the faithful pilgrims that their pilgrimage has brought them close to God.

Accompanying this is the practice of prayerful and meditative devotion, in which pilgrims at a holy site imagine the sacred events that happened there. Often they seek to imagine themselves as present in those past events. While the Stations of the Cross comprise the most widely known collection of these locations, nearly all sacred sites serve as foci for such meditation.

Protestant travel to the Holy Land takes on a totally different character. Instead of seeking out the churches at holy sites, Protestants avoid them. Their Holy Land experience emphasizes the land itself and its connection to Jesus. As Professor Tony Cartledge of Campbell University observes, "They want to walk where Jesus walked, to weep where Jesus wept, to sleep in some proximity to where Jesus slept."

Cartledge continues, "Protestants love the Sea of Galilee because they know Jesus was there and no one has contrived to cover its stormy waves with a stony church. They love the Garden Tomb and Gordon's Calvary because those sites fit their biblically inspired imaginations much better than the sooty stone and polished marble found in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre." Despite its lack of a centuries-old designation as sacred, Protestants favor the Garden Tomb because it is a garden where one can worship among the scents of native flowers, the shade of indigenous trees and the songs of local birds.

Archaeological sites also comprise favorite places for Protestant tourist pilgrims. Here, the earth of the ancient land lies exposed. At Megiddo, pilgrims are guided through the city's development through the centuries spanning the Old Testament. At Capernaum, the excavations have uncovered dirt layers on which Jesus may have strolled.

As Cartledge comments, Protestants "love to visit Capernaum because it still has the look of a simple village where Jesus visited the home of his friend Simon Peter." Few of the buildings uncovered there come from the first century of Jesus, but they are only a century or two later. The archaeological excavations and restoration done primarily for historical study and preservation also provide Protestant visitors with religious inspiration for understanding Jesus and the biblical record concerning him.

In the end, Orthodox and Catholic Christians visit the Holy Land created through the architectural ornamentation of churches and shrines. Protestant Christians visit the land itself, discovering Jesus' home by viewing the territory and visiting archaeological excavations, but largely ignoring the religious monuments by which Christianity made it holy.

I want to thank Tony Cartledge for sharing with me a copy of his essay, "Walk about Jerusalem: Protestant Pilgrims and the Holy Land," presented April 23-24 at a Duke University conference on "Archaeology, Politics, and the Media."

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