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## Protestant Pilgrimage to Jerusalem

### Preparations for the Kingdom of God in Apocalyptic Rhetoric Strategy

The vast majority of sacred shrines and holy sites host pilgrims united by strong degrees of cultural homogeneity. But Jerusalem differs on this point – it draws pilgrims from a vast multitude of nations and cultural traditions since the city is considered holy by three major religious traditions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The representatives of these traditions go partly to different places at different times where they are engaged in different forms of worship. Often these visits are marked by clashes at the holy places. Indeed, as Glenn Bowman so aptly puts it, “Jerusalem does not, in fact, appear so much as *a* holy city but as a *multitude* of holy cities – as many as are the religious communities which worship at the site – built over the same spot, operating at the same moment, and contending for hegemony” (Bowman 1991: 98).

What makes Jerusalem holy for “Charismatic Protestants”<sup>\*</sup> today is not so much about something found in the city, but something brought to it from outside, which is matched up there in the presence of monuments as markers of sacredness. The various Jerusalems which Bowman speaks of “function as signs in the diverse discourses on religion, power, and identity of the visiting groups” (Bowman 1991: 98).

The diverse types of pilgrimage to Jerusalem – Jewish, Muslim, Orthodox and Catholic – are not discussed in this paper. My focus is on specific developments concerning contemporary Protestant pilgrimage. In order to understand the discordant variety of present-day Christian, charismatically inspired, pilgrimages to Jerusalem the several experiences of the Holy Land must be illuminated through Christian imaginings of the places. This would naturally require an inquiry into, and an integration of biblical texts with, the topic of study, since that is where we find the sources of

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\* Instead of Evangelical Christians (in America) I prefer using “Charismatic Protestants” referring to a unity composed of a multitude of denominations and independent churches. These representatives share one common feature, namely, the religious interest in Jerusalem. See also Ariel 2002: 2.

Protestant devotion to Jerusalem. Though Christians around the world share the same biblical sources, their interpretations of them, especially in relation to the pilgrimage to Jerusalem, differ. Here the different cultural milieux and their historical processes play an important role. It is, however, impossible to deal with such a topic in a study of this length. The distinctions between the three major strains of Christianity lie basically in the interpretation of their substantial differences between the epistemologies and soteriologies (Bowman 1991: 101–19).

One other type of journey to Jerusalem is not dealt with here, that is *religious tourism*. “Religious tourism” is a term used in discussing the prospects and problems offered by the large numbers of people who visit pilgrimage shrines and other religious attractions. The term as such has less theological and traditional implications, encompassing a broader range of motivations for visiting places with religious reference. Despite this neutrality, the religious tourist can come as a causal tourist and, as a result of emotions experienced, return home either as a pilgrim or return for another visit (Nolan and Nolan 1989: 42–43). In this paper I shall demonstrate how the impact of the apocalyptic religious imagination becomes considerable in the process of developing mainstream representations of Jerusalem in contemporary Protestant pilgrimage to the city itself. I will attempt to show this by illuminating the use of apocalyptic rhetoric strategy in a particular case by referring both to the *International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem* (ICEJ) and the *International Christian Zionist Center* (ICZC). The empirical material presented here was collected during my several periods of fieldwork in Jerusalem (1998–2000) as I attempted to collect data for my doctoral thesis.

## **Representations of Jerusalem as *force majeure* to protestant pilgrimage**

The place of Jerusalem in Christian Theology today can be traced all the way back to the foundation of Christianity. But theology and religious practice do not always go side by side. The sacrality of Jerusalem for the West should be illuminated from the perspective of the many public and physical representations of Jerusalem: the monuments, dedications and folklore traditions relating to Jerusalem, expressions that might otherwise seem incomprehensible, but are nonetheless endowed with a significant religious value (Leppäkari 2002a: 212–13). The Jerusalem experienced by each group rises less from the city’s physical presence than from the public and learned images of the holy city. To a considerable extent, according to Bowman, Jerusalem is a place where pilgrims who have inherited or developed certain images of this city during enculturation elsewhere can embody those

representations and engage them as aspects of the material world (Bowman 1991: 99). These public representations would not be of any importance, however, if they did not simultaneously allow people to interpret them and prescribe them with meaning and significance.

In Christian tradition, one must remember, pilgrimage is voluntary. The term "pilgrimage" or *peregrinatio* refers to the wandering of people across the fields (*per agere*) indicating vagabondage. Adopted by early Christianity, the term changed in sense from the pejorative to positive, meaning the journey of the faithful who left their families and ordained life in order to seek salvation and union with God. These wanderings of the early Church's *peregrini* were not, however, directed towards any concrete point. These wanderings were supposed to imitate the vagrancy of the Old Testament prophets and the behaviour of anchorites who retired to the desert in search of salvation (Grabois 1988: 65). St Augustine's term for the faithful was also *peregrinus*. While also connoting "traveler", *peregrinus* was simply someone who was away from home on a journey that eventually would lead the person to return to his or her native city (Dougherty 1980: 36–38). Gradually, early Christian pilgrims abandoned this practice of wandering and went to specific sanctuaries and shrines for their devotional exercises. It is in this process of legitimating religious pilgrimage and developing a particular image of Jerusalem and its sacred history that rhetoric comes into picture.

### The language of the endtime

The principles of rhetoric seek to discover the purpose of any discourse, together with the means used to achieve this end (Thurén 1990: 43). When studying apocalyptic rhetoric we must first try to determine the kind of situation the speaker appears to have in mind and where he or she stands; the attitudes, values and needs of the audience which invites the person to give a speech or produce a text. We must also try to understand what the speaker seems to want to do in relation to these attitudes and values. Very often, millenarian religious belief is popularly regarded as something "dangerous" or "abnormal". This does not, however, need to be the case. Most present-day Christian lovers of Israel are *passive millenarians*. They do not literally seek to take redemption into their own hands even if they use a rhetorical endtime discourse including words such as "war", "warriors", "battle" and "weapons". Until concrete actions occur, this is just a way of expressing their religious concern about the future, though this concern is extremely serious for pilgrimage participants. (Leppäkari 2002a: 196.)

For this specific type of contemporary, charismatically charged Protestantism Jerusalem is equated with redemption. Jerusalem is at the centre

of their religious belief and adherence, prayer and thought. The destiny of the city is further intertwined with the redemption of mankind, and as such an existentially charged symbol, the city represents an on-line connection straight to God. For these Protestants the city becomes an endtime calculator, with the result that activities in present day Jerusalem are measured in an endtime perspective by taking into account images of past and future. Especially the current domestic and foreign policies of the state of Israel are considered a kind of monitor for measuring on which stage the redemptional process is currently being carried out. Things happening in the world, and especially in Jerusalem, are believed sooner or later to meet up with the prophecies of the Apocalypse.

We need to observe that the language of the apocalypse, for the participant, is a matter of life and death and, even more so, apocalyptic rhetoric is important since it is in this dualistic sense connected to the individual's most crucial life concerns. Jerusalem is then a symbol helping to create meaningfulness for believers, thus becoming one of the most important factors in the religiously motivated individuals' construction of life. To illuminate this cognitive make-up, I suggest we look for the different apocalyptic representations to be found in believers' expressions of religious adherence. This can be done by tracing apocalyptic representations, as they are understood within the concept of a "kingdom of God" and by examining how the latter is further understood as a synonym for Jerusalem.

The image of Jerusalem is important because of what happened there in terms of Christian revelation, but Jerusalem for the participants becomes even more important because of what will happen there in the future. These two things unite "Charismatic Protestants" all over the world. Their concern about the destiny of the city concurs with that of the Jewish population of Israel as they share a common enemy, Islam. As Mr Jan Willelm Van der Hoeven, one of the founding members of the International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem and presently head of the International Christian Zionist Center writes:

... through prayer and praise, bring down the wall of Islam and see the freedom for God's word forth to all those people for whom He died and rose again. [...] Then just as we saw comm[m]unism come down, so shall we see the wall of Islam crumble. We do not need bombs. We need the prayers and praise of our God to finish every obstacle that stands against Him fulfilling His word to His people. (Van der Hoeven 1996: 139.)

The charismatics not only encourage people to travel to Israel, but to make a *pilgrimage*. Pilgrimage to Jerusalem can then be seen as a religious statement about what is happening in the world today. Furthermore, it is an expression of their faith in the God of Israel. As Mr Van der Hoeven put it to the listeners of the *Livets Ord* (Word of Life) congregation in Turku when

he encouraged them to take part in the celebrations of the Feast of Tabernacles arranged by Christian Zionists in the region:

It is God's biblical time to come to Israel. [...] Let's go to Zion! Don't come as a tourist to Israel... I don't read in the Bible: come and be a tourist [...]. You are sons and daughters of the living God of Israel. Come as Levites, walk before the army. These coming weeks as Israel is facing maybe a war, we do not know, it might well be. (Author's interview with Mr. Van der Hoeven in Turku, 13.07.2000.)

The Christian celebrations during the Jewish Feast of the Tabernacles are the major annual pilgrimage event taking place in Jerusalem for Charismatic Protestants. Today, the feast serves as a trademark for the ICEJ, a non-denominational pressure group with messianic expectations (Leppäkari 1999: 129–40; 2002a: 139–68). Members of the ICEJ identify themselves as Christian Zionists. This indicates that they have arranged themselves around the readings of several biblical books and believe that God has called them to bring the Jews (God's original chosen people) back from the Diaspora to rebuild the biblically promised Kingdom of God in Jerusalem, to settle Israel's biblically mandated borders and – in some cases – to re-establish the Jewish Temple. Christian Zionists believe in this work since they see it as part of God's global endtime plan. The celebrations arranged by the Christian Zionists during the Feast of Tabernacles enables the Protestant devotee to "comfort the Jews and to witness the work of God". This devotion sets off sparks of religious enthusiasm and encourages preachers to start up with their own "bless Israel" campaign back home. The Finnish branch of the ICEJ, to mention one example, arranges meetings around the country in various denominations such as Pentecostal, Baptist, Salvation Army, Free Church and in local Lutheran parishes. Nowadays, one can also participate in virtual pilgrimages and thus also "bless Israel" on the Embassy's homepages or by funding their projects.

During the Christian celebrations of the Feast of the Tabernacles the crowd of thousands of participants are over a period of seven days addressed in a large convention hall (the *Binyenei Ha'ooma*) and the Ein Gedi desert by various Israeli politicians and representatives of the ICEJ. Not too many excursions are made in the region, though it is popular among the Christian pilgrims to visit the sites where Jesus did his work. The Charismatic Protestants tend to be disengaged from the traditional holy sites revered by the Orthodox and Catholics, for both historical and theological reasons (Bowman 1991: 116). This becomes especially apparent in the worship at the Tomb of Christ. While major Orthodox and Latin churches have incorporated their belief by erecting churches on the tomb of Christ, the Holy Sepulchre, Protestants prefer to ignore the almost 2000 year long tradition and gather at the Garden Tomb, outside the old city walls. Here

Protestants assert they can witness Christ himself while imaging him *in situ* rather than in the monuments thrown up by two thousand years of devotion to his memory (Bowman 1991: 118). It can be argued in line with Bowman that the Garden Tomb displays the characteristics of Protestant Holy Land devotion. The garden-like appearance, and especially the lack of icons, allows the pilgrims on the spot to confirm their apocalyptic representations of Jerusalem and strengthen their belief in preparing for the Kingdom of God. Worth mentioning here is that Mr Van der Hoeven was for several years the Warden of the Garden Tomb and one of the initiators of the Christian Feast of the Tabernacles in 1980.

### **Intertwined images of the earthly and the heavenly Jerusalem**

The type of Christian pilgrimage to Jerusalem discussed here allows the believer to visit his or her religious dream as incorporated in the earthly Jerusalem. During this physical visit, images of Jerusalem become vivid: all of us carry our own Jerusalems in our heads. Inner images or mental representations of the city are personal and coloured by each individual's emotions and experiences. But they also include socially learned patterns of thought, which have been created in combination with both public and cultural images of the city. In any event, every traveller to Jerusalem has their mental baggage stuffed with stories about the place. Every traveller possesses mental representations of the place before actually getting there. Depending on how the visit is experienced, interpretations become reshaped. Either the city corresponds to our mental images, or it does not at all resemble the "Jerusalem" we pictured in our minds. In the end, it is the *interplay* of the different mental and public representations of the place that shape present images of Jerusalem (Leppäkari 2002b: 156, 172–74; Leppäkari 2002a: 242).

In this mixture of representations, the earthly Jerusalem becomes mistakenly taken as the heavenly one. It is not always easy to distinguish the two versions of the holy city, the heavenly and the earthly. They are often confused in one single eschatological expectation (Cardini 2000: 758). Put more precisely, present-day Jerusalem is considered "holy" by the Charismatic Protestants, but not as holy as it will become when the Kingdom of God is established there.

In the case described here, we are dealing both with socially distributed patterns, which we were all brought up with, and inner patterns that are created through our experiences in connection with the working of our minds (Holm 1997: 81; Holm 1995: 136). Apocalyptic symbols and representations of Jerusalem further continue to shape meaning for believers.

Many Finnish sympathizers with Israel, for example, have never actually visited Jerusalem, but they still feel that the city is something out of the ordinary. For these religiously motivated individuals, Jerusalem – both the actual city and what it represents – is experienced as an identity-establishing phenomenon. The Israeli–Palestinian conflict is then affiliated to a larger apocalyptic redemptional context which coincides with personal redemption. Charismatic devotees enthusiastically declare political standpoints drawn on religiously interpreted references. In this way we can observe how apocalyptic arguments and symbols are drawn into clearly political conflicts.

## Conclusion

The notion of Jerusalem in religious belief is constructed by the transmission of various representations concerned with the image of the city. For Western Christianity today, Jerusalem is not only important because of the things which Jesus of Nazareth, according to the tradition, did there. For many Christians Jerusalem is vitally important because of the apocalyptic promise Jesus left his followers with: I'll be back! Therefore, the position of Jerusalem in the religious end-time play is crucial, since apocalyptic representations of the New Jerusalem motivate contemporary believers to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, and to partake actively in political disputes about the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Quite contrary to the early Christian pilgrims, modern Protestant *peregrini* consider themselves legitimated, if not urged, to pray and make a pilgrimage "for the sake of Jerusalem", to dwell in the midst of the earthly Jerusalem and make a political statement regarding the circumstances of the city and the host country (Dougherty 1980: 36–39). Jerusalem as *the place* for the millenarian kingdom of God has indeed become the believer's business.

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