Thomas Maria Weber

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The Transformation of Pagan Sites to Christian Holy Places at Jerusalem

By

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Jerusalem is of crucial importance to Jewish religion but also to Christianity and to Islam. Here, the fulfillment of the prophecies accumulated in the passion of Christ who was crucified on the Golgotha rock outside of the western city wall, subsequently buried near-by, and rose from the death at the third day.

It is the aim of the present contribution to this conference to draw attention to a rather limited period of Jerusalem's long history, to the two centuries between the second Jewish revolt and the foundation of that city as the Christian center of the world. The investigation bases on acknowledged sources of ancient historiography. Even through trying to focus on these historical processes in an unbiased manner, I wish to underline that I do not intend to propose any sort of domination of one of the three world religions on that place, neither by the sources quoted nor by my own intentions. It is, moreover, my own very personal wish and vision, that at one future day a God the Almighty will show a passable way to all three confessors to interact peacefully in mutual respect and tolerance to each other for the sake of civilized mankind and for a well balanced political and justice maintenance of this extraordinary city.

I. The Second Jewish revolt (131-135 AD)

In order to understand the situation when Saint Helen and her son Constantine transformed the city to the universal Holy place of Christianity, we have to turn back into history to the years of 129/130 AD, when emperor Hadrian undertook an official journey to visit the cities of the Oriental provinces of the Roman empire. The exact date, when he resided at Jerusalem, is not known. At that time, the town lay vasty in ruins since some sixty years as a result of the Roman conquest in AD 71. The so-called second temple, built by King Herod, had been demolished and abandoned because the Jewish population has been banned to the countryside. By Roman law, issued after the siege, it was forbidden to them to settle in the city and to worship on the temple mount.

As in many other oriental cities, the imperial visit showed consequences on the future legal status of Jerusalem, and, subsequently, on a planned building program that would change its appearance from a Hellenized oriental city to a Roman imperial one. Three main decisions were obviously issued during the stay of Hadrian: 1. To give it the legal status of a Roman military colony which would cause a permanent presence of Roman army and administration. The 10th legion Pretensis was to become Jerusalem's "house-troop" with headquarters at Caesarea Maritima and detachment all over the country. 2. To rebuild the Herodian temple mount as a holy precinct dedicated to the Roman imperial cult of the Olympian Zeus. In the eyes of the orthodox Jews, this would not only ritually contaminate their Holy of the Holiest, but it would mean the abolition of all further Jewish hope to rebuild the third temple, necessary in order to fulfill their Messianic prophecies. 3. As the great Swiss scholar, the late Lee Mildenberg, has convincingly lined out, the planned interdiction of the circumcision was felt as the most serious threat by the Jews because this would factually result in the end of their religion.

These three reasons are commonly acknowledged in serious historical scholarship as causing factors for the uprising of the Jewish population under the leadership of the mysterious personality of Bar Kosiba, praised as "the Savior" in Talmudic Sources (Taamid 84, 68d). In autumn 131
AD the well prepared war actions erupted at Kaphar-harub near Modin, unexpected for the Romans. The historian Cassius Dio Coccceianus (ca. 150-235 AD), writing a Roman History of 80 books in Greek language starting from the origins of the state up to his own days, reports on the events as follows: "But (Hadrian) stirred up a war of no small extend or duration by founding a city at Jerusalem in place of that which had been destroyed, which city he named Aelia Capitolina, and by setting up another temple on the site of the Lord's Temple, for the Jews thought it an outrage that any foreigner should be made citizens of their city and that foreign temples should be set up in it. And so, for as long as Hadrian was present in their country and in Syria and Egypt, they remained quiet, except that they made the arrows which they were required to furnish of deliberately bad workmanship so that the arms might be rejected and then they might have them themselves for their own use. And then in his absence far from the country they began their insurrection. They did not dare to meet the Romans in pitched battle, but they seized upon all the strategic positions in the country and strengthened them with walls and underground passages so that they might have ways of escape when overpowered, and they ought pass unobserved underground from one of their strong places to another. Moreover, they made holes in the upper part of their subterranean galleries to give them light and air.

At first the Romans took no notice of them, but when the whole of Judaea became moved and all the Jews throughout the land were stirred up and gathered together and did the Romans much mischief both by treachery and in open war, and many peoples belonging to other nations were led by hopes of plunder to join them, and nearly all the world was in an uproar about it, then at last Hadrian sent his best generals against them. Of these the first was Julius Severus, who was transferred from his governorship of Britain and sent against the Jews. At first he did not venture to make any direct attack upon them on account of their numbers and their desperation; but he did cut off various groups of them by the numbers of his soldiers and officers, and starved them for provisions, and shut them up in fortresses. Thus he was able slowly but surely to wear them out and destroy them.

Very few Jews survived: Julius Severus took 50 of their most notable forts, 985 of their chiefest villages were laid in ruins, and 580,000 men were slain in skirmishes and battles, while the number of those who perished by starvation, plague, or fire cannot be reckoned. Thus most of the whole Judaea was laid waste, even as had been foretold to the its people before the war. For Salomon's tomb, which they regard as one of their holy places, fell to pieces and was scattered abroad of its own accord, and many wolves and hyenas came howling into their cities. Many of the Romans also perished in this war; and so Hadrian, when he wrote to the Senate, did not use the usual imperial prefixed, to wit, "If you and your children are well, it is well. I and the army are well." (Cassius Dio, History LXXIX, 12).

Two points may astonish the reader of Dio's account on the uprising: First, he does not mention any coordinating headquarters of the insurgents. For him, obviously the personality of Bar Kosiba, did not exist. Second, there is no mention of what happened with the city of Jerusalem during the first successful phases of the revolt. No other ancient text reports that the Jews really drove the Romans out but many of the reactions to suppress the uprising would hardly be plausible, if they did not. A strong piece of evidence, supported by indirect allusions in some of the scripts of the Dead Sea scrolls, is commonly deduced by modern scholarship by the coins of the insurgents which they struck during the three first years of their operations: One issue displays the facade of a "reconstructed" (?) temple with the name of Jerusalem on them. In addition, those coins from the third year proclaim as the legend "for the liberation of Jerusalem", a sign, it has been argued, that the city was being used as the Jewish insurrectionist's mint. The question, whether the ruined Herodian temple has been rebuilt at the period of the intermediate insurrectionist's occupation and whether Jewish cult had been practiced on the mount, remains open and hence a vast field of random speculations.

It is, on the other hand, important to state that the early Christian communities at Jerusalem, originating by themselves from the Hebrews, were obviously not concerned by the Roman ban of Jewish rituals within the premises of the city, neither before nor after the revolt. This issue is variously raised in the Church History by Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea Maritima: "The climax of the war came in Hadrian's eighteenth year, in Bethera [sic.: probably Bitiri, seven miles southwest of Jerusalem] an almost impregnable village not very far from Jerusalem. The blockade lasted so long that hunger and thirst brought the revolutionaries to complete destruction, and the
instigator of their crazy folly paid the penalty he deserved. From that time onward the entire [Jewish] race has been forbidden to set foot anywhere near Jerusalem, according to the conditions and ordinances of the law of Hadrian which ensured that not even from a distance might Jews have a view of their ancestral soil. Aristo of Pella tells the whole story. When in this way the city was thus interdicted to the Jewish race and suffered the total destruction of its former inhabitants, it was colonized by an alien race, and the Roman city which later arose there changed its name, so that it is now, in honor of the then reigning emperor, Aelius Hadrianus, it is known as Aelia. Furthermore, as the church was now composed of Gentiles, the first after the bishops of the Circumcision to be put in charge of the Christians was Mark (Eusebius, Church History IV, 6). In a previous chapter (IV, 5), the same writer provides profound evidence for the continuation of Christian episcopate at the city: "I have not found any written evidence on the dates of the bishops of Jerusalem — it is known that they did not live very long — but I do have documentary evidence of this, that up to Hadrian’s siege of the Jews there had been a series of fifteen bishops there. All are said to have been Hebrews in origin, who had received the knowledge of Christ with all sincerity, and consequently those who had the authority to decide such matters judged them worthy of the episcopal office. For at that time the whole church was made up of Hebrew believers who had continued from apostolic times down to that later siege in which the Jews, after a second revolt against the Romans, were overcome in full scale-war." Even though not said explicitly by Eusebius, the continuous line of bishops makes one deduce a continuity of veneration of those places within the urban topography in Pre-Constantinian times.

II. Colonia Aelia Capitolina (135-330 AD)

After the suppression of the second Jewish revolt, the countryside extending from the Red Sea in the south to the springs of Hule in the north, and from Jordan river in the east to the Levantine coast in the west bore for first time in history the fateful name Palaestina. According to Hadrian’s decisions Jerusalem was juridically re-founded as a Roman colony. This legal act is testified by an emission of commemorative coins dating to 130 AD showing the emperor ploughing the boundary of the city with ox and cow, and the legend says “COL(onia) AE(LI)(A) KAPIT(olina) COND(ita)”. The city’s new name paid tribute to two major Roman elements, to the gens Aelia, the family of the ruling imperial house, and to Jupiter Capitolinus, the supreme Roman state divinity who was closely linked to the person of the emperor. The representation of the she-wolf suckling the twins Romulus and Remus tributes the importance of the new colony in the Roman self-understanding: The scene was the emblem of the Latin state’s capital and of its new colony in Judaea which was in fact a distant Roman enclave whose inhabitants held Roman citizenship. According to the Italian prototype, the colony’s territory was organized in seven amphitheatres or living-quarters. Unfortunately, no visitor or historian during the considerable time span between 135 and 330 BC left any account on what happened within the city. An anonymous 6th century AD chronicler, called chronikon Paschale, refers to two public baths inaugurated by Hadrian, colonnaded streets which led down to the Siloam pool, a mysterious trikera,erion, probably a triple-tiered temple or basilica, and - even more enigmatic - a square structure of unknown purpose, the Greek kúdra or Latin quadrā. In detail, these monuments are difficult to identify in the urban topography.

What at that time happened with the old Temple Mount is controversy disputed in scholarship. Another coin struck after the re-foundation of the colony under Hadrian bears the representation of a temple of the Capitoline trias Jupiter, Juno and Minerva. The problem is, that the Capitolium of the colony was established to the west of the Hadrianic colony south of a temple of Aphrodite / Venus, and one would expect the assemblage of these three cult statues placed in a shrine at that location. Some scholars, however, argued that it would be quite possible that the depicted temple it the one on the Temple Mount to which Cassius Dio referred to in the passage quoted above. In addition to this, Hieronymus (in Excerptum 1.2.9 = CorpChristLat 73,33) mentions that at the old sacred place a statue of Hadrian was displayed beside that of Jupiter ("ubi quodam erat templum et religio Dei ibi Adriani statua et iouis iudicis collocatum est"). An anonymous Christian pilgrim refers to explicitly two imperial statues on the Temple Mount (Itinerarium Burdigalense 591,1-4 =
Corpus Christi Lat. 175, 16: "Et in aede ipsa, ubi templum sibi, quem Solomon aedificavit ... sivam ibi statue ducit Hadriani") of which one could have been a colossal equestrian statue out of bronze (cf. Hieronymus, in Matth. 4, 24:15 = Corpus Christi Lat. 77, 226: "Adriani equestri statua qua in ipso sancto sanctuarum loco asque in praeceptum diem stetit."). Accordingly, the temple Mount was dedicated to the cult of the emperor, and the display of official statues within the ruins of the destroyed Herodian temple is difficult to imagine. According to Roman religious customs, such idols of public veneration demanded an architectural framework of whatsoever sort.

The famous vignette of the Byzantine Madaba mosaic map has since long and repeatedly quoted as a first hand source for the new urban development subdividing the territory into the intersecting colonnaded traffic axes of the Decumanus and Cardines Maximi, but Israeli excavations of these streets since 1967 proved this view rather simplifying. The tripe-arched Damascus gate, originally a free-standing archephal monument for the emperor, was constructed contemporary with the colony's foundation, certainly a monumental base for the display of imperial imagery. The omnipresence of imperial statues in the newly founded colony is further witnessed by a monumental inscription, today exhibited at the entry of the so-called Flagellantia, once crowning such an archephal monument spanning over one of the main streets.

The area that underwent the most substantial building activities after the establishment of Aelia Capitolina was the area north of the camp of the legio X Fretensis: This rocky terrain was situated extramural during the reign of Herodes, limited by the so-called second wall. Here, the Calvary served for the execution of condemned criminals and outlaws, and a cemetery of rock-cut tombs extended in gardens around it. The landscape relief formed there the depression of the transversal valley between the Tyropoeon rift and Mount Zion, and thus demanded enforced engineering to create leveled construction grounds for sumptuous spatial land-use. The southern part of this artificial terrace housed the patio of the forum, lined by the capitollium. To the north of this, the temple of Aphrodeite / Venus covered the former Calvary including the tomb in which crucified Jesus rested three days prior to his resurrection according to Christian belief. Noteworthy, the cult of this Graeco-Roman goddess of love is not only attested by references of Christian authors (Hieronymus, Epist. 58,3,5 [in 395]: “in crucis urpe statua ex marmore Veneris a gentibus postita ... siv in loca sancta per idola polluissent”; Cf. Paulinus of Nola, Epist. 31,3; Ambrosius, Comm. in Ps. 47-48; Socrates, Hist.Eccl. 1,17; Rufinus, Hist.Eccl. IX 6: “simulacrum in eo veneris ... religiosa femina”; Sozomenos, Hist.Eccl. II 1,3.), but also bronze and marble statuary from Aelia Capitolina may be linked to it.

III. Hê Há gia Pólis Hierousa[lêm]

Early fathers of the Christian church use the name Hierousalem or (in the plural) “ta Hierosólyma” in a symbolic sense as the materialized earthen view of heavenly peace. Its nomenclature as the Holy city, “hê hagia Polis” in Greek corresponding to Arabic al-quds, is written in capitals to the left above the vignette on the Madaba mosaic map. This extraordinary status is owed to the fact that the life of Christ ended here in the humiliation of his death on the cross and continued with the triumphal resurrection from the tomb. The situation of written sources has to be evaluated as quite favorable due to the extend literary heritage by Eusebius Caesarensis (ca. 260-339 AD), the author of a History of the early church at Palestine and of a panegyric biography of emperor Constantine I. The high value of his reports lies in his engaged historiographical activities as a bishop and theologian, widely an eye-witness of those events he is writing about.

According to his vita Constantinii (“Life of Constantine”), the chief target of the emperor's interest was the place of Jesus' burial. Indirectly, his report is a proof for the tremendous earthworks mentioned above executed for the construction of the sanctuary of Aphrodite / Venus: “This place [sic.: in Jerusalem, the tomb] certain ungodly and impious persons had determined to hide from the eyes of men ... Having expanded much labor in bringing in earth from outside, they covered up the whole place. Then, when they had raised this [sic.: fill] to a certain height and paved it with stone, they entirely concealed the divine cave beneath a great mound. Next, as if nothing further were left for them to do, they prepared above ground a dreadful thing, a veritable
sepulcher of souls, building to the impure demon called Aphrodite a dark shrine of lifeless idols and offering their foul oblations on profane and accursed altars ... He [self: Constantine] gave orders that the place should be purified, counting it especially fitting that a spot that had been polluted by his enemies should enjoy the mighty working of the All-God at his hands. And as soon his orders were given, the contrivances of deceit were cast down from high to the ground, and the dwelling place of error, images, and demons and all, were overthrown and utterly destroyed.

Nor did his zeal stop here. The emperor gave further directions that the materials of the destroyed structure, both wood and stone, should be removed and taken as far from the spot as possible, which was done in accordance with his command .... Again, inspired with holy zeal, he issued orders that, after the soil had been excavated to a considerable depth, they should transport to a far distant spot the actual ground, earth and all, inasmuch as it had been polluted by the defilements of demon-worship.

This was done without delay. And as one layer after another was laid bare, the place which was beneath the earth appeared; directly as this was done, contrary to all expectation, the venerable and hallowed monument of our Savior's resurrection became visible, and the holy cave received what was an emblem of his coming to life (Life of Constantine III, 26-28).

The narrative on the re-discovery of Jesus' burial cave implicative a strong oral tradition in the early Christian community about the precise location of the tomb. Nearly two hundred years were gone since the site disappeared under the foundation fills of the Aphrodite temple. As shown above, Eusebius used reliable documentary to prove the list of holders of the episcopal seat at Jerusalem from the Apostolic times up to his own days. Archaeologists of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, who investigated the rock of Golgotha carefully, reported graffiti crosses allegedly to be dated to the 1st century AD. It is nonetheless plausible to a rather high degree that the adherents of the young religion re-visited the place of the resurrection from the earliest days of their community and that the knowledge about it did not vanish with its covering. Once rediscovered, the clearance and embellishment of the Holy Sepulcher advanced rapidly. Let us read what Eusebius records about the project:

"Whereupon the emperor issued sacred edicts and, when he had provided an abundant supply of all the things required for the project, he gave orders that a house of prayer worthy of God should be erected round about the Cave of Salvation, and of the scale of wealth and imperial comfort ... To the governors of the provinces in the East [he gave instructions] that by providing liberal and abundant grants they should make the work exceedingly large, great, and costly: and to the bishop who at that time resided over the church at Jerusalem [Macarius] he sent the following letter..." (Life of Constantine III, 29). In this epistle, the emperor makes Macarius in charge for the building process, supported by his friend Dracilius, the deputy of the Praetorian guards, and by the governor of the Province. As working material, repeatedly marble is mentioned, a material alien in the Near East which had to be imported by far-distance trade from Asia Minor, Greece, and the Cycladic islands. In own person, the emperor provides specific construction details. A special concern of his, for instance, is paid to the vaulted roof of the church, to be fitted with a panelled ceiling with golden ornaments. All the public and state resources of the empire, as well as the emperor's private fortune, were thus being mobilized for this work at Jerusalem.

The basilica constructed in front of the Holy Sepulcher was one of the most admirable buildings of the area, slightly younger than saint Peter's cathedral in the Roman capital. The Jerusalem church blueprint the same five-aisled ground plan and was made accessible for the stream of pilgrims by a magnificent square courtyard lined by colonnaded porticoes: "...one crossed over a very large space of ground, to wit, the atrium, which was open to the pure air of heaven. Its floor was a polished stone pavement, and it was bounded by long porticoes which ran round continuously on three sides." (Life of Constantine III, 34). The prayer hall, designed to receive the charity commemorative liturgy of the Last Supper, stretched eastward from the rock of Calvary until the monumental entryway, beyond the atrium, touching upon Hadrian's north-south cardo. "The basilica was constructed adjoining the site opposite the cave, which looked toward the rising sun, a truly extraordinary work, reared to an immense height, and enormous in both length and breadth. Slabs of variegated marble lined the inside of the building, and the appearance of the walls outside exhibited a spectacle of extraordinary beauty, in no way inferior to the appearance of marble, shining brightly with polished stones which fitted exactly to each other (Life of Constantine, III, 35-36). The commonly accepted reconstruction of the Holy
Sepulcher church at Jerusalem as a five-aisled building, a most prominent feature of sacral architecture which influenced Christian and Muslim sacral architecture up to present days (Creswell, 1932; al-Daire, 2001), relies on Eusebius' information that “twin colonnades” along the northern and southern sides with three entrance gates to the east, helped the officials to regulate the stream of religious tourists at the site. The central nave ended at the western side in a structure covered by what Eusebius calls a hemispherion, a half round cupola, apparently a rotunda which was supported by a circle of twelve columns. This central building of circular ground plan is commonly named until the present days by the Greek term Anastasis = “resurrection”.

In the centre of this rotunda the tomb of Christ consisted originally of an underground rock-cut chamber with an entrance which was lockable by a circular slab rolling in a rack in front of the tomb. Burial caves of this type, dating to the early 1st century AD, are vastly attested in the vicinity of Jerusalem and in Transjordan. In the present case, the Holy Sepulcher, had to be chiseled out of the bed rock in order to become a free standing building that could be circumvented by pilgrims in processions. Representations of this holy place on early Byzantine pilgrim flasks characterize it as a sort of canopy with a door locked by a double fence. Further, a stone model at the Musée Archéologique in Narbonne is considered to be a small scale reproduction of the Holy Sepulcher, providing an imagination on the original ground plan and the elevations. In accordance to this, the structure chiseled out of the rock had the form of an apsidal temple with a tetra style entrance porch, comparable to prototypes in pagan Syrian temple architecture of the earlier Roman imperial period. The ground plan of the older pagan temple of Aphrodite at the site, most probably furnished with an adytum (=Holy of the Holiest) of semicircular shape, might have inspired the architects of both the Anastasis as well as of the Constantinian basilica.

The layout of the basilica with the huge atrium, the additional lateral aisles and the rotunda was designed to receive masses of worshippers, who were directed in processions around the cave of Salvation by passing the holy rock of the Calvary. As Christianity advanced from the early 4th century AD to be the Roman state religion and rapidly spread over all the empire, Jerusalem became the target of over-regional pilgrimage, open to an “international” public of believers. Soon pious travelers from the western provinces arrived at the city which they considered as the “mother of all churches” and the heavenly center of the world. A graffiti scratched on the Calvary rock displays a late antique ship and its Latin inscription says “to the Lord we will go”.

Jerusalem, a heavenly home on earth for people all over the orbis terrarum? This is neither a fiction nor a dream. It was reality, at least for a couple of years and decades after the reign of Constantine I.

Further Reading (selective)


