

# ***The Holy Land, a source of inspiration***

by Per Beskow

The Holy Land, and Jerusalem in particular, has always held pride of place in the Christian mind. The scene of biblical history, the place of Our Saviour's suffering, death and resurrection – how could it ever be forgotten by any Christian? But the concept of the Holy Land has often been more ideal than topographic, and the heavenly Jerusalem for many has been a more of a living concept than the earthly Jerusalem.

## **The Holy Land**

There have been periods in history when the Holy Land as such has aroused greater or lesser interest in the Western Christian world. The Crusades in the Middle Ages and the era of romantic attraction to the Holy Land in Protestant circles during the 19<sup>th</sup> century are two such periods. But I would like to address something different, and by this I mean the great number of theologians, writers and monks who lived in the Holy Land from the third to the sixth century, and who used their creative abilities to bring fresh knowledge to the Christians in the Greco-Roman world of the land of the Bible, its language and culture.

The first generations of Christians around the Mediterranean coast had gradually lost their connection with the Holy Land. After the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, the city was no longer a centre of the Christian Church, and after the unsuccessful uprising in 135 AD, when Hadrian replaced the Jewish city with the Roman Aelia Capitolina, Jerusalem seemed to have lost all importance for Christians. There was a Christian community in Jerusalem, but Caesarea on the coast soon became the most important Christian centre in the Holy Land. In the diaspora the Jews were generally Greek-speaking and they had gradually lost their contact with the Hebrew language. This also affected the Christians, who virtually had no knowledge of the language themselves. The Old Testament for them was the Greek Septuagint translation. When a renaissance of the Hebrew language began around 200 AD, which meant that Hebrew was once more taught and studied in the diaspora, it did not affect the Christian understanding of the Bible, as the Jews and the Christian gone their separate way at this time.

### **Origen in the Holy Land**

There was, however, a small number of Christians who took an interest in the Holy Land, who learnt about its topography och culture, and even settled there themselves. It may surprise some that I take my start with Origen. We generally associate him with the Hellenistic culture of Alexandria in Egypt, where he grew up and began his career. He is often remembered only for the eccentric cosmology of his work *Peri Archon (De Principiis)* which he wrote during his

early years in Alexandria. But far more important for the future was his biblical work which he accomplished mainly in the later part of his life when he had settled in Caesarea in the Holy Land. While in Alexandria he had begun to write commentaries on biblical books, and had also acquired a certain knowledge of Hebrew. We know that he wrote commentaries on Genesis and one on the Psalms, but both have been lost. He also began writing his great commentary on the Gospel of St John, but it was not completed until his period in Caesarea.

Origen was an extremely productive writer, but his work would never had been completed without the support of Ambrosius, a wealthy man in Alexandria, not to be confused with St. Ambrose of Milan. He was well educated and was probably a professional rhetorician. He supported Origen financially so that he could spend his time writing, and he provided him with four secretaries. When Origen moved to Caesarea after a conflict with his bishop Ambrosius still continued to support him and sent him two clerical assistants from Alexandria in order to facilitate his work. Origen was able to establish a biblical institute of sorts in Caesarea, the first of its kind.

After the disastrous uprising in 135, most learned Jews in Jerusalem had moved northwards and some of them settled in Caesarea. The Jewish community there was Greek-speaking, but there existed a considerable knowledge of Hebrew too,

and in this context Origen had an opportunity to use the Hebrew biblical text more extensively than was the case in Alexandria.

He finished his gigantic Hexapla in Caesarea, a biblical work, including six versions of the Old Testament text. It was set up in six parallel columns so that every verse could be scrutinized in comparison between the versions. This is the first known example in history of a tool for scholarly biblical exegesis, and was far ahead of its time. The six versions were: the Hebrew text, written with Greek characters, the Septuagint, two other Jewish translations by Aquila and Theodotion respectively, and two anonymous translations, called Quinta and Sexta. This mastodont work probably never existed in any more than one copy, but we do know that both Eusebius and St. Jerome visited Caesarea to consult it. Very little of the Hexapla remains today, but in its time it was link between the Greek and Hebrew biblical texts, and paved way for St. Jerome's Latin *Versio Vulgata*.

Origen also finished his great commentary on the Gospel of St. John and wrote a commentary on the Gospel of St. Matthew, but not least of all, he wrote a large number of commentaries on the books of the Old Testament, for example the Song of Songs, Ezekiel and the Twelve Prophets. Moreover, he wrote a large number of homilies on Old Testament texts, some of which became influential

in the West, such as the homilies on the Pentateuch, on Joshua and on the Song of Songs.

But Origen did not undertake this gigantic work solely because of his scholarly interest. It was his firm conviction that the whole Bible, including the Old Testament, is the word of God directed to the Church. The full meaning of the word of God is not evident to every reader or listener. It has a deeper meaning which has to be discovered, and which has to be sought with diligence and under divine guidance; an idea which Origen had taken from the Jewish philosopher Philo in the first century. His three levels of interpretation had a great impact on the Church, not least of all in the west, when Rufinus – to whom I will return later on – translated Origen's works into Latin. St. Ambrose of Milan was deeply influenced by Origen's allegorical interpretations of the Bible, particularly the Song of Songs. In Western tradition Origen's three levels of understanding were increased to four – the so-called *Quadrige*, literally “a chariot drawn by four horses”; the literal, the allegorical, the tropological and the anagogical sense. As late as the twelfth century it is still evident just how deeply Origen's exegesis had influenced monastic theology in the West, especially among the Cistercians, such as St. Bernard and William of St.-Thierry.

**Goal of pilgrimage**

Origen was the most renowned settler in the Holy Land of the third century. Others followed his example and took to the Holy Land as a base for their life and theological work. This became more feasible after Constantine the Great had overthrown his co-emperor Licinius in 324 AD thus becoming the ruler of the East. The bishop of Jerusalem sent him a letter asking for permission to remove the temple of Venus which had been built on top of the tomb of Christ. Constantine not only granted this favour; in the following years he built the Church of the Resurrection in Jerusalem and the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, appointing his mother Helena as a supervisor.

In this way the gates were opened for pilgrims to visit the holy places, and the Holy Land soon became a well-known and sacred territory in Christian minds. The pilgrims did not visit only Jerusalem and Bethlehem; soon the whole country had become a goal of pilgrimage. A decisive role was played by Eusebius of Caesarea, an historian, and a great admirer of Constantine. He was also a settler – possibly from Antioch – and was made bishop of Caesarea, the then still leading Christian community in the Holy Land. Eusebius was the first Christian writer to take an interest in the Holy Land as such. He was strangely uninterested in Jerusalem, and certainly saw the holy city as Caesarea's rival for ecclesiastical power. But for the knowledge of the land in general and especially of its holy places his work had a great impact. His *Onomasticon* was a survey of the biblical places in the Holy Land, but influenced by Origen, as he was, he was

more interested in the symbolic meaning of the place-names than of the places themselves. Probably, the original version also included maps with the places indicated. His work contributed to the topographic knowledge of the Holy Land. Pilgrims were able to find their way, and when the monastic movement spread to the Holy Land, many communities settled in places believed to have been of importance in biblical history.

### **Egeria's descriptions of liturgical events**

In the 380's AD, Egeria, an adventurous lady of Spanish origin and possibly a nun, crossed Egypt, the Holy Land, Syria and Asia Minor, riding on a donkey. She climbed to the tops of Mount Sinai and Mount Nebo, and described them with enthusiasm. She visited many holy places, and managed to find small foundations of monks who were always willing to offer her meals and accommodation, and to show her around on the site. The Holy Land had literally been taken over by these monks and had become a living inspiration of biblical history. Egeria, like other travellers, spread knowledge of the land of the Bible to the West, and made its landscape familiar to many who never had an opportunity to visit the Holy Land.

Egeria seems to have spent several years in Jerusalem, and she relates the most detailed description known of the liturgical life there during her time. This was the age of St. Cyril, bishop of Jerusalem (ca 350–386), and the age of his

liturgical innovations. St. Cyril used the topography of Jerusalem and the holy places illustrate the sacred history, most dramatically during the Holy Week. On the Sunday before Easter, the people gathered on the Mount of Olives, walking in procession into the city and all the way to the Church of the Resurrection carrying palm and olive branches in memory of Christ's entrance into the city. On the Thursday there was a vigil at Gethsemane. On the Friday all assembled in the open courtyard between the Anastasis and the Martyrium basilica, to listen to the story of the Passion from all the four Gospels. Then they went into a chapel close to Golgotha and kissed the relic of the Holy Cross, held by the bishop. During Easter night baptism of the catecumens of the year took place, while the faithful were assembled in the Martyrium basilica. Finally, the doors to the Anastasis were opened, and all participated in the celebration of the Eucharist.

Pilgrims to Jerusalem were deeply impressed by these liturgical events and took their memories of them to their homelands. Soon the ceremonies in Jerusalem were propagated to the rest of the Church, in cathedrals, in monasteries and in parish churches. Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, as they were called, became the climax of the ecclestical year throughout Christendom, along with Ascension day and Pentecost.

In Jerusalem, the Anastasis became a place of prayer on account of the monks, *the spoudazontes*, “the eager ones” who spent most of their time both day and night in prayer. As well as the common morning and evening prayers they kept the monastic prayers of the third, the sixth and the ninth hours of the day as well as a night vigil. In this way the whole monastic offic gradually took shape and was spread to the monasteries in the East and West. Many of the liturgical details from the Resurrection Church in Jerusalem are known not only from Egeria’s diary but also from the writings of St. Cyril himself, and in particular from his *Catecheses*.

Pilgrimages, liturgy, prayers – all these received their inspiration from Jerusalem. Visits to the Holy City became increasingly difficult during coming centuries and at times were made impossible. New pilgrim goals were created in other parts of the world, such as Santiago de Compostela in Spain and Nidaros-Trondheim in Norway, and their inspiration from Jerusalem is unmistakable.

### **Monastic foundations in the Holy Land**

There is no doubt that St. Cyril regarded Jerusalem not only as the most sacred place in the world, but also the geographical centre of the earth, as can be seen on the medieval Mappa Mundi maps. This was made clear to him during the miracle of the luminous cross which appeared over Jerusalem, the arms of which embraced the whole of the city. He found this extraordinary event so important

that he wrote a letter to the Emperor informing him about it. Jerusalem's status as the Holy City would remain even after it was lost to the Muslims.

The monastic movement had its beginnings in Egypt and soon in Syria and Asia Minor. But in the Holy Land there were also monastic foundations, which became particularly important for the Church in general. By this I refer to the communities of Melania the Elder and Rufinus on the Mount of Olives and the communities in Bethlehem of St. Jerome and his companions Paula and Eustochium.

It is worthwhile to consider these companions. St. Jerome had worked as a secretary and archivist of Pope Damasus I in Rome, and had made a translation of the four Gospels into Latin. He had close contacts with a circle of ladies from the high Roman aristocracy, mainly widows and their unmarried daughters, who had begun to live an ascetic life in prayer and pious studies. These contacts were not looked upon favourably by many, and Jerome and two of these followers finally left Rome for the Holy Land in order to live a more regular monastic life. Also Jerome took an interest in the topography of the Holy Land and wrote an extended Latin version of Eusebius' *Onomasticon*.

St. Jerome is best known to us through his Latin translation of the Bible, the *Versio Vulgata*, and in particular his revolutionary translation of the Old

Testament from the Hebrew. The translations of the Old Testament used by the Church had until then all been made from the Greek Septuagint, but St. Jerome regarded these translations as defect. Hebrew was the original language of the Old Testament, and therefore the Hebrew text was the only reliable one, *Hebraica veritas*. His derisive attitude towards the Septuagint may have been excessive, but it was his belief in the infallibility of the Hebrew text which was the driving force behind his translation work. It is a matter of discussion how much Hebrew Jerome really knew, but in the Holy Land he had access to Jewish scholars with sufficient insights in both the text and the language, and in fact, his work could not have been done outside of the Holy Land. He also wrote extensive commentaries on Old Testament scriptures.

The Vulgate spread to the West and became the official Bible version of the Latin Church, with the exception of the Psalms, where an older translation was used. The Vulgate connected the Western Church anew with its origins in the Holy Land and its roots in the Hebrew language and culture. The Vulgate remained the normative text until the Second Vatican Council, and in the new translation, the so-called *Neovulgata*, the Old Testament is likewise a translation from the Hebrew. Today, Hebrew is studied in Catholic universities and is a prerequisite for biblical research.

But let us return to the monastic communities in the Holy Land. Not only the Hebrew language but also Eastern Greek theology penetrated from these monasteries into the Latin West. I have already mentioned Rufinus and his translations of Origen into Latin, but this was not his only task. He translated works of St. Basil the Great and St. Gregory of Nazianzus as well as the Church history of Eusebius, and in this way a great deal of the most important Greek theological literature reached the West, binding the Eastern and Western Church stronger together. The great mistake of his life was probably his modified translation of Origen's *Peri Archon*, which caused a dramatic break with St. Jerome and damage to his own reputation.

The monastic communities in the Holy Land were important in other respects. Evagrius of Pontus came to the Mount of Olives, depressed after an unhappy love-affair in Constantinople, and it was Melania the elder who took care of him and put him on the right track. Here he learnt the ways of monastic life, and became himself one of the great spiritual leaders of the monks in Egypt. John Cassian, who was of Scythian origin, learnt the monastic life in a hermitage near Bethlehem before he went to Egypt and further to southern France where he founded one of the first monasteries in the West, St. Victor in Marseilles, and brought ideals of Eastern monasticism into the Western Church. Thus the Holy Land could on several occasions function as a school for future monastic leaders in other parts of the Mediterranean world.

## **Monks in Gaza**

The monks in the Holy Land also influenced the Eastern Church, and it is important to mention the monks in Gaza, especially in the Abba Seridos monastery during the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries. Among them were Barsanuphius and John, Abba Isaiah of Gaza, Abba Zosimas and St. Dorotheus of Gaza. Their importance has not always been duly recognized, but they are now the subject of fresh studies which will increase our interest in their spirituality. There are reasons to believe that the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, the sayings of the Desert fathers, were first collected in this region. These sayings became favourite reading in monasteries, both in the East and the West. St. Dorotheus of Gaza was known in the West. It is remarkable that Abbé Armand-Jean de Rancé studied his writings and made use of them when writing his rule for the Trappist order.

## **St Birgitta and the Holy Land**

The context of my lecture has been directed mainly to the influence of the Holy Land on the Western Church because this is what I am most familiar with. I will end this lecture by turning to my own homeland and refer to St. Birgitta (1303–1373), the patron saint of Sweden and a co-patron saint of Europe. Many streams of influence from the Holy Land converge in her spirituality. When she became a widow at the age of 47 and began her life as a constant pilgrim and

prophet, she often referred to herself as the Bride of Christ. This identification of the Christian soul with the Bride of Christ is taken directly from Origen's interpretation of the Song of Songs. It was carried to the West by Rufinus' translation of his works and expounded by St. Bernard of Clairvaux. And it developed in her mind at a time when she had lost her husband and lived in a close connection with the Cistercian abbey of Alvastra in Sweden, where she took daily part in their masses and office. The Abbey had been founded by St. Bernard himself and was certainly imbued with his spirituality.

In her visions and prophecies she had images of the Holy Land in her mind, but she had to wait until the end of her life until she could undertake a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and Bethlehem. In the Church of the Nativity she had a vision of the birth of Christ, which Our Lady had already promised her, and the image she saw in her vision had a great influence on contemporary iconography.

Christ himself gave her instructions for the order which she founded, the Order of the Most Holy Saviour. It was an order of nuns and monks living separate lives in an abbey built to serve their purpose, where the monks served the spiritual needs of the nuns. It is not unreasonable to think that St. Birgitta may have been inspired by the communities of Melania and Rufinus, or of St. Jerome and his female followers in the Holy Land.

My intention in this lecture has been to demonstrate that the Holy Land down the centuries has always been the inspiration and focal point of all Christian life. The main source of this inspiration is the Lord himself who chose this land for his life on earth and for the formation of his Church. When Christians have so often been drawn to Jerusalem and to the Holy Land, it is His presence they have sought and His Spirit who has inspired them and their work and prayer which has been so fruitful for the holy Church all over the world. My hope is that I have been able to give a glimpse of this unfathomable mystery, and I thank you for your attention