Jessica Colmenares

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**A Christian Pilgrimage to The Holy Land**

The innate desire to embark on a sacred journey to holy lands is one in which has been documented for centuries. Whether the destinations of these pilgrimages end at a religious or nonreligious site, there is an underlying desire by all to seek some sort of transformation, which may occur in a physical, psychological or emotional manner. The healing dynamics of a pilgrimage include a journey with physical, social, and symbolic effects; an act of personal empowerment; the belief that the individuals’ identity in relationship to sacred others integrates the self within collective models; the particularizing of individual suffering with a broader framework of meaning; a sense of solidarity with a community of fellow pilgrims; and quite possibly an alteration of consciousness that elicit psychophysiological forces that support a range of bodily healing responses (Winkleman & Dubisch, 2005). The phenomenon of a pilgrimage has historical roots in a variety of faiths and beliefs and intertwines the concepts of holy place and holy movement to inform the faithful of ‘where they are’ and ‘where they are going’ within the sacred traditions of the religion (Taylor 2011: 262). Jerusalem, referred to as the Holy Land, has proven to be a sacred destination for the world’s three leading monotheistic religions, including Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, with followers visiting so as to experience life-changing events and to embrace a form of intimacy with their God.

No physical factor can account for the significance of Jerusalem in Israel, due to the fact that it does not lie on any major trade route, nor does the land have any real agricultural benefits, therefore, its importance lies in its religious significance (Prior 2001: 507). The concept of Jerusalem as the center of the world is rooted in the Old Testament, and in the Middle Ages, it

was referred to as “umbilicus regionis terrae,” meaning the navel of all the land (Yoshikawa 2005: 194). The geographical centrality of Jerusalem is closely linked with the allegorical

interpretation, which offers a fourfold reality of Jerusalem: ‘‘The material Jerusalem is the city placed in Judea, the mystical is the Church, the moral is the faithful soul, the anagogical the heavenly home’’ (Yoshikawa 2005: 194) While devotees of each of the three religions share an intense attachment to the city, it is quite different for each religion. These differences are fundamental and derive from quite distinctive theologies (Prior 2001: 508).

In regard to Christianity in Jerusalem, which will be the focal interest of this paper, the Holy Land, specifically the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, is a significant religious site of pilgrimage. Not only did Christianity come into fruition in Jerusalem, but it is also in this city that the saving activity of God was accomplished. For Christians, Jerusalem is a testament that their religion is not a matter of mere ideas and ideals, but derives from the intervention of God in history in that specific place and its surroundings (Prior 2001: 512). The Church of the Holy Sepulchre, as pictured below, has proven to be one of the most important and visited sites during a Christian pilgrimage, because it is where the tomb of Jesus Christ was found.

The sepulchre of Jesus was witness to the central mystery of Christianity, the resuscitation of the dead god. Here was the ultimate space of the absent presence, a space that was celebrated because it was empty, giving proof of divine power over death. In the Christian complex of Jerusalem, the absent presence is commemorated and celebrated. The difficult message of the vacant sepulchre required continuous reaffirmation through the use of new witnesses (Wharton 1995: 92). The eastern end of the Holy Sepulchre houses the freestanding, open-air monument dedicated to the Miraculous Healing. The Miraculous Healing involves an event that took place during the Byzantine period where Helena, the mother of the Emperor Constantine, discovered the cross on which Jesus Christ was crucified. Unable to determine which of the three crosses she found was that of Christ, Helena placed all three crosses to either a dead or sick person, who was miraculously restored to health when touched by the True Cross of Christ (Aist 2008: 37). The eighth century Bishop Willibald of Eichstatt in Bavaria was a witness to the miraculous healing powers of the Holy Sepulchre. The place of the Holy Cross is the setting for the restoration of Willibald’s sight after a two month blindness: ‘He came again to Jerusalem, and as he entered the church where the Holy Cross was discovered, his eyes were opened and he received his sight’ (Wilkinson 2002: 241, 245). The image below is that of Bishop Willibald of Eichstatt from the Dormition Abbey, Jerusalem (Aist 2008: 41).



Willibald encountered the monument of the Miraculous Healing and, with it, a landscape of physical healing to which he ultimately attributes the restoration of his eyesight (Aist 2008: 42). Throughout history, there have been claims of physical healing when in the proximity of a holy shrine, as is evidenced through the miracle of Bishop Willibald.

Christian pilgrimages to the Holy Land is not only beneficial towards aspects of physical healing, but also spiritual healing, which enables the pilgrim to envision and obtain a true form of intimacy and devotion to their God. Throughout his pontificate, John Paul II made it known that he wanted to go on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. As a Christian, his identification with the Holy Land was grounded in the Christian approach to salvation: that the life, death, and

resurrection of Jesus Christ are constitutive of salvation and that Jesus Christ is the paradigm for human salvation (Taylor 2011: 263). John Paul II used pilgrimage as a personal means of experiencing a connection with Jesus, making this connection real through its concreteness. Underneath his personal desire to obtain this closer connection with Jesus, and ultimately God, was a deeper theological understanding of the concept of holy space. As John Paul II noted in his 1999 Letter Concerning Pilgrimage to the Places Linked to the History of Salvation, sacred space is “Where the encounter with the divine may be experienced more intensely than it would normally be in the vastness of the cosmos.” Moreover, he stated that this journey “…is an exercise of practical asceticism, of repentance for human weakness, of constant vigilance over one’s own frailty, of interior preparation for a change of heart” John Paul II focused his pilgrimage of the paradigmatic holy place of Jerusalem, because for Christians, Jerusalem is a ‘living sign’ of the redemption that Christ accomplished for all people and it is that “special land” [in which] “our reconciliation with God was brought about” (Taylor 2011: 263-264).

John Paul II identifies the correlation between holy space and the concept of spiritual and physical empowerment. For Christians to partake in a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, they are not only repenting for their sins, but they are also making themselves vulnerable to their Higher Power, which is God, and by engaging in this journey, they are making themselves physically and spiritually stronger by embodying Jesus Christ within themselves.

Margery Kempe’s[[1]](#footnote-1) pilgrimage to Jerusalem is one in which is documents the spiritual processes that occur during such journeys. Similarly to John Paul II, Kempe desired to obtain a spiritual connection with God that surpassed praying, for the pilgrimage itself was an avenue in which to gain clarity and understanding of the Redemption. For medieval Christians, who identified themselves as the descendants of Adam and Eve, making the trip to Jerusalem was symbolically associated with the journey to their heavenly homeland redeemed by the second Adam and the new Eve[[2]](#footnote-2) (Yoshikawa 2005: 193). Margery, like other medieval pilgrims, visited Jerusalem not only because they believed that it was the actual place where the Crucifixion of Christ had taken place, but also because of its symbolic meaning for the salvation of the world. In the High Middle Ages, it was stated that ‘the soul of the world is found at the middle of the world: consequently, Jerusalem from whence comes Redemption is found at the Centre of the World’ (Yoshikawa 2005: 194). In the book, Margery claims that during her trip to Jerusalem, she is granted a vision of a heavenly Jerusalem, which is defined as a place whose inhabitants have their names written in the Book of Life and dwell with God in complete and eternal fellowship (Yoshikawa 2005: 197). Another moment of Kempe’s pilgrimage that proved to be a manifestation of her intense spirituality occurred during her procession to the Holy Sepulchre. Margery’s desire to identify herself with Christ grew so extreme that she experienced her first crying fit and engaged in roaring and bodily moving, spreading her arms out wide (Yoshikawa 2005: 200). Whether one speaks of visions, like those of Margery Kempe, or they simply desire to see the Holy Land, a pilgrimage to Jerusalem for those of the Christian faith is an inner journey of the soul’s salvation.

Devotion to Jesus Christ and God is one of the most fundamental aspects of the Christian faith, and pilgrims believe that by visiting the Holy Land, they are given the opportunity to become closer to God and to restore faith within themselves. A pilgrimage, however, does not solely include the individual’s own journey to Jerusalem, but it also highlights the coming

together and bonding of those who worship God so as to reinforce their faith in a loving Heavenly Father. It provides for a communal structure of individuals who follow the same faith and to go through the different rituals together, for that is what Jesus did with his disciples. For Christians, and those of other monotheistic faiths, Jerusalem serves as an inner spiritual reality within the soul where God may be encountered for, “Jerusalem is as much as to say sight of peace and stands for contemplation in perfect love of God, for contemplation is nothing other than a sight of Jesus, who is true peace” (Hilton 1991: 227-8) The Pilgrimage to Jerusalem ultimately plays a role in allowing one to feel as if they are closer to God, however, in Christianity, the bible speaks of God being everywhere, with no one particular place that He truly exists. Some believe that by praying and visiting such a holy place, like that of Jerusalem and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, they are able to have a sort of spiritual awakening and experience a moment where they feel as if Christ is truly inside of them, allowing them to fulfill that desire to complete their inward journey towards salvation.

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1. Margery Kempe (c. 1373-1438) was known for her book *The Book of Margery Kempe,* which is believed to be the first autobiography in the English language. The book chronicles her pilgrimages to various holy sites, as well as her mystical conversations with God. This paper focuses on her pilgrimage to Jerusalem. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This sense of Jerusalem as the symbolic source was especially strong between the late eleventh and fifteenth centuries, most likely as a result of crusading ideology. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)