HOLY LAND?

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Challenging questions from the biblical landscape

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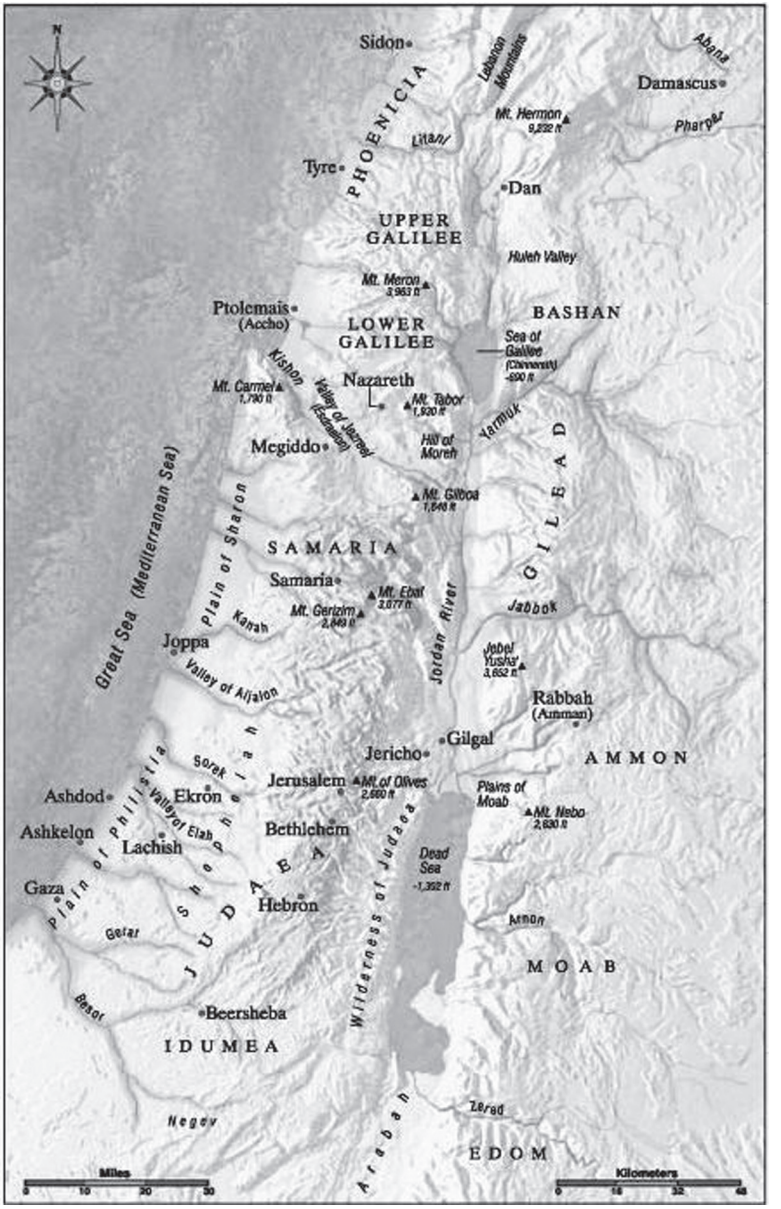

The Holy Land in biblical times

Introduction

The terrain of the Holy Land is a questioning landscape, in more than one sense. It poses to us acute questions which touch on the deepest issues of human life. It invites us to ask our own questions. Written in Jerusalem, this book aims to help the reader to discover the topography of the Holy Land afresh, and let the land speak its contemporary and timeless questions to us. As Director of Courses for St George's College, leading a variety of pilgrimage-journeys in the lands of the Bible for students from all over the world, I realized that pilgrims need support in order to tease out the questions which the land poses today, and the present book emerges from this setting. It is offered not as an answer book but as a resource book: the material will help you work through your own responses to the questions.

The landscape of the Holy Land is one of vivid contrasts. The very shape of the land has been formed by the grating movement along fault lines, seismic shifts and clashes between tectonic plates in the Great Rift Valley of the Jordan: a clue, an indicator to us that this might turn out to be a land where conflict is endemic, where different sorts of masses meet and interact, where fault lines are to be detected within human society itself. This land-bridge between Egypt and Mesopotamia, this meeting place between Africa, Asia and Europe, has since antiquity been a place of encounter and clash. Here, where the desert and the sea face each other, where the bleak Dead Sea in the lowest place on earth is linked to the teeming and life-giving Sea of Galilee, where wilderness and fertility lie side by side, is a land of paradoxes, contradictions and deeply challenging questions.

Thus the starting point for our reflections in this book is the landscape itself, which becomes a catalyst for thinking about a range of issues which are both urgent and abiding. This approach is inspired, first of all, by the prophetic and metaphorical approach

to creation that we see in the Scriptures. Topography suggests typology. The Psalms delight in the symbolism of trees, water, rock, mountain and wind (Pss. 1; 18). Every prophet of the land exults in vivid images from the hills: the very terrain speaks the message. Isaiah cries out: 'Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low' (Isa. 40.4). Hosea sees climate and field as bespeaking God: 'Sow for yourselves righteousness; reap steadfast love; break up your fallow ground; for it is time to seek the LORD, that he may come and rain righteousness upon you' (Hos. 10.12). Amos pleads: 'Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream' (Amos 5.24). The prophets draw from the land powerful metaphors for salvation and judgement, and the contours of the terrain become a symbolic universe. Jesus himself takes a deeply contemplative and sacramental approach to the land, the secrets of the kingdom revealing themselves through parables of seed, mountain, field and sea (Matt. 13; Mark 11.23). Today, this same land is both holy and unholy: it is at once a sacred landscape and a scarred landscape. At every point ancient biblical memories collide with modern political and social realities. The very topography poses to us questions and dilemmas that will help us as we traverse the terrain of our own spiritual journey, wherever in the world we may be living.

The approach of the book is, second, inspired by the conviction that spirituality and physicality are interwoven and inseparable. While the landscape raises for us issues that touch on our life in the Spirit, it also requires us to look again at our life as incarnate and embodied: we will face questions that link us to the divine–human communion, but also require us to attend to our life in society today. Time and eternity meet here, sometimes uncomfortably. One striking feature of pilgrimage to the Holy Land is the constant juxtaposition between spiritual opportunities and present-day political and social contexts: in almost every 'holy place' there is an unsettling reminder of contemporary realities. The pilgrim can never escape into a 'spiritual moment' untouched by demanding questions, but at every turn must expect spirituality to be confronted and challenged by today's pain and hope, and so must

be prepared to experience an interplay or dialogue with issues of justice and peace. This book thus invites us into a dynamic arising from the land itself, in which we seek to attend to the voices of the peoples, the insights of spiritual writers, and the call of the gospel.

This book is offered to three types of reader. First, it is for those who are planning to go to the Holy Land on pilgrimage. You will be wanting to prepare for your adventure, and the book will awaken and alert you to the profound issues that await you, enabling you to begin to prayerfully grapple and wrestle with these. Sometimes pilgrimages turn out to be, unintentionally, superficial: thanks to the constraints of time, or perhaps to narrowness of vision, pilgrims find themselves running where Jesus walked. Sometimes pilgrimages can be purely devotional or historical in focus and fail to engage with the Holy Land as it is today. My aim is to enable you to undertake a pilgrimage that will be profound and life-changing as it interacts with the challenges of the land.

A second group of readers will be those who have visited the Holy Land already. You long to revisit it in your memory or imagination, not only to recall treasured moments, but also to revisit it in a deeper sense – taking another look, thinking afresh about its questions. A third group includes those who may for various reasons not be able to visit the Holy Land. You will want to see how the land of the Bible can inspire Christian discipleship today.

The issues here are not parochial but universal – they are rooted and contextualized but they invite you to work out responses in your own setting. *Holy Land?* looks at issues that are indispensable for anyone on a journey of faith. Each chapter explores one major theme and identifies questions that emerge. In the opening chapter, the city asks us, What is home? In Chapter 2, the land invites us to consider the issue of holiness and the question, Where can I find God? From the waters of the River Jordan, in Chapter 3, questions relating to the theme of identity bubble up: Who am I? In Chapter 4, we enter the depths and discover the significance of caves in the landscape, asking: How can I face the darkness? Chapter 5 introduces us to significant rocks, which confront us with issues of memory and forgiveness, while in Chapter 6, we

ascend the Mount of Transfiguration and look at the issue of control and letting go. The water of the Sea of Galilee, in Chapter 7, invites us to explore the issue of the sharing of scarce resources. In Chapter 8, we enter three very different gardens which in their different ways speak of the theme of struggle. Our exploration of the desert in Chapter 9 demands that we face the questions about solitude and silence. In Chapters 10 and 11, we attend to aspects of the human landscape, receiving the questions of the walls and roads of the land. Finally, in Chapter 12, the sea invites us to look out to wider horizons and consider our vocation and mission.

The book may be used by individuals or groups – questions for reflection are suggested at the end of each chapter. It may be used by parish pilgrimage groups upon their return from the Holy Land, in order to take their thinking to a deeper level, as a tool for theological reflection. It may be used by groups preparing for pilgrimage, to open heart and mind to the issues that await them. It may be used by a Lenten or parish study group as a resource to deepen their discipleship.

I am grateful to all who have made this book possible: to my wife, Ann; to SPCK editor Alison Barr; and to colleagues and pilgrims at St George's College, especially Rod Jepsen, the chaplain, who contributed many of the photographs (that in Chapter 4 is by Ben Drury). I hope that this exploration will enable you to discover the Holy Land in a fresh way, and help you engage anew with your own land and context.

Andrew D. Mayes
St George's College Jerusalem

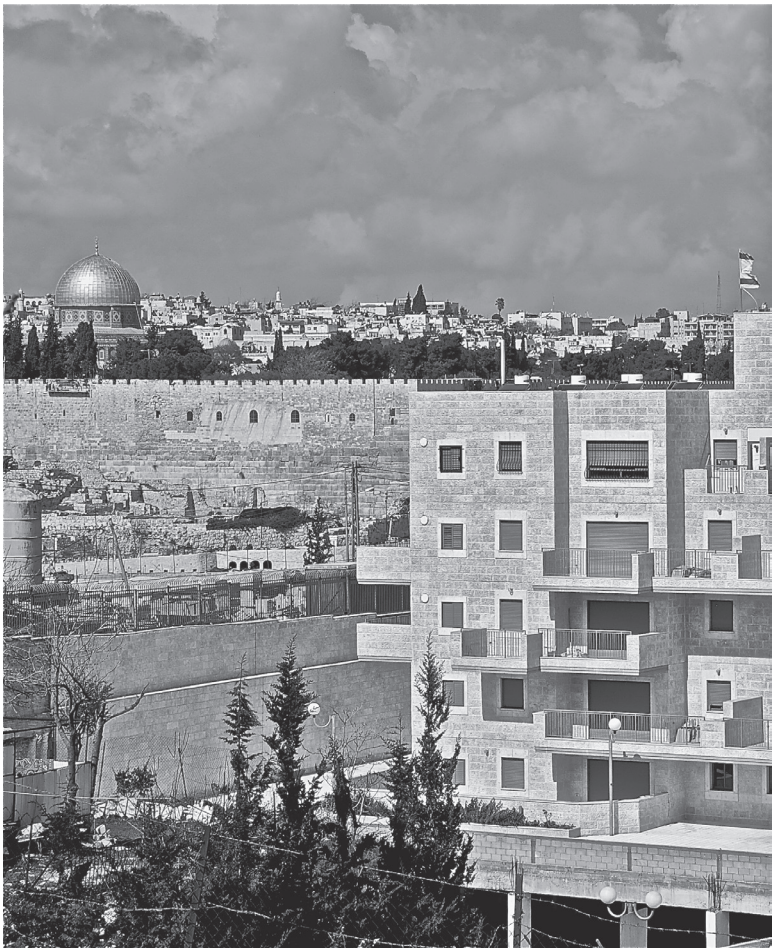

Figure 1 Fresh Israeli settlements in an Arab neighbourhood face the locale of God's house, the Dome of the Rock

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The city's questions

What is home?

> I kiss the walls at Damascus Gate every time I get back to Jerusalem. This is one of the wonders of the world! The sights, the smells, but most of all the holy places invigorate me. Whatever happens, we are going to stay here. Of course we could sell up and move out to Ramallah – it is fast becoming the capital for Palestinians – but we are not going to let them do what they did to my family in Acco [Acre] – throw us out. Of course I am tempted as a young man to make a career in Dubai, like some of my friends. But *this* is home. Of course I get upset by the Israeli settlers taking our Arab properties in the city – their flags and their spitting at us. By staying put in Jerusalem we maintain our dignity. Things are not good here for young people right now.

Abed, 22, works on Jerusalem's Via Dolorosa at his dad's shop, which is crammed with traditional items, including antique Arab women's headdresses and wedding robes. He studies business at the Arab American University at Jenin and comes to help a couple of days each week. Around the corner is a building bedecked with large Israeli flags, the Star of David blowing defiantly in the breeze. Above an archway a sign reads *Igud Lohamay*, denoting the Association of the Fighters of the Battle for Jerusalem. In 1967 a group of soldiers regained possession of this building from the Jordanians; having served from 1886 until the Arab uprising in 1936 as a Jewish college for the study of the Torah, once again it functions today as a yeshiva. A Zionist sister organization, *Ateret Kohanim* (literally 'Crown of Priests'), is dedicated to acquiring

Arab properties in the Old City and in East Jerusalem, so as to accomplish the Judaizing of the city.

A narrow courtyard off the street is packed with motor scooters and bicycles and a flight of steps leads to a buzzing, hectic scene, for it is the end of breakfast for the yeshiva, and the landing serves as both corridor and kitchen. Already students are in the main room, which is at the same time dining room, synagogue – with the ark for the Torah scrolls and bema, from where the Scriptures are read – and study room, crammed with desks and chairs. The seminary has more than two hundred students, mainly in their twenties, from all over Israel: some hope to go on to become rabbis, while others will follow professions in the military, law or business. When the yeshiva was re-established, the focus was on studying temple ritual – in the hope that the Third Temple would be rebuilt within a generation, as the necessary precursor to the coming of the Messiah.

Asaph, 23, is earnest and intense and cautious of visitors but gently soft-spoken, and courteous. He explains:

> We are here to study Torah, Halakah [Regulations], Talmud [rabbinic teaching] and Gemara [commentaries] – just like other yeshivot. We are able to put off entering the army, the Israeli Defence Forces, because Torah study can take precedence over everything else. I get an exemption certificate each year from the Dean to show to the army authorities, so they can't call me up. Of course, it is the greatest privilege living so close to the Temple Mount and the Kotel [Western Wall], but it is mingled with the everyday reality. This is a hostile environment, a scary street to live on. A rabbi from here was stabbed in the neck a couple of years ago. He survived. There was a murder before that. Arabs sometimes spit at us going down to the Kotel, or speak abuse. You can't trust people. I am always wary. I look at people closely as I walk down, in case they might attack me – you learn to stay very alert. For us, fear is in the air. It is a risky thing for Jews to live here. We do not say we live in the Muslim quarter – we call it the renewed Jewish quarter. It is part of the restoration of Israel, the redemption of the land, the

> Jewish people back on this soil. You ask me what I think of my Arab neighbours – I can't make a reply. But this is sure: we are back on the street. It is a restoration. We are reclaiming this street for the Jews. We are here to stay!

Almost next door lives an Armenian Christian, Katar, who came to Jerusalem 15 years ago to marry a man from an old Jerusalemite family: they have two daughters.

> My grandmother was exiled and made a refugee twice. First, after seeing with her own eyes the killings of fellow Armenians in Turkey, in 1915 she fled with her parents to Jaffa, the Mediterranean port of Palestine. There she grew up, and married my grandfather. At the age of 39, in 1948, she fled again from Jaffa as all the Palestinian and Armenian families had to move out, and she came to Jordan with thousands of other refugees. I really feel for the Palestinians. They suffer like the Armenians suffered. I mean, there are things in common. Being displaced, insecure, uncertain. I feel a certain connection with them. How is it like living here? I feel I don't really belong in a way, though I live here.
>
> Where is home for me? I am swinging between two worlds, between Jordan and Armenia. My story is there. This is not my country. This is the only Christian convent on this part of the road: this is the Muslim quarter, we have Muslim neighbours. At first, I found the presence of Israeli soldiers on the street here unnerving. I mean, in Jordan, where you see soldiers you expect to see trouble: that is why they are there. Here it is normal, everyday. It always reminds you that we are under military occupation. We have to try to live a normal life in a place which is never normal! And as a mother, I always feel protective towards my girls. I fear for the safety of my girls. We live an enclosed life. We Armenians have to keep separate, to preserve our identity and our culture, that is how we survive. We speak the Armenian language in the family, and I don't let the girls out to play in the street with the Arab children.

These three voices, Muslim, Jewish and Christian, from present-day Jerusalem encapsulate hopes and fears which cluster around the

theme of 'home' – the theme we are exploring in this opening chapter. The Old City of Jerusalem, just one square kilometre in area, is home to some forty thousand people: Jews, Christians and Muslims, living cheek by jowl.

As one crosses the threshold of the city, the senses are assaulted. There is a cacophony of sound: church bells pealing out, the five-times-daily call to prayer from the minarets, a siren blast at Friday sundown announcing the arrival of the Jewish Sabbath, while sellers cry out their bargains, beggars call out for alms and playing children shriek. A diversity of fragrances fills the air: early morning bakeries emit their intoxicating smell of newly baked bread; Arab women, coming in from the countryside, sit in the gutter to sell aromatic freshly picked mint, thyme and sage; spices such as cumin, cloves, cinnamon and saffron are piled high at open stalls. The smell of roasting kebabs competes with the sweet allure of pastries. A riot of colour hits the eye: crimson-red pomegranates, green olives and bright yellow mangoes overspill their stalls, while stunning embroidered carpets bedeck the alleyways. The city is alive and effervescent with energy: mingling and blending together in the paradox of the holy city are the people's heartaches and hopes, aspirations and anguishes. It is a veritable melting pot of cultures, a fractured mosaic of humanity. Jerusalem is an ever-changing kaleidoscope, a matrix of faiths, a vortex of devotion, a religious maelstrom, a microcosm of the world.

The four crowded residential quarters are home to diverse communities, each with its own distinctive character. The golden Dome of the Rock, resplendent in the sunshine, dominates the Muslim quarter and is glimpsed at various turns from the alleys. The area heaves with humanity, vibrant with its mosques and markets, its shops selling everything from copies of the Qur'an to dustpans. The streets are a human sea, with a tide that ebbs and flows according to the hours of prayer at the Al Aqsa mosque, as men flood up to the Noble Sanctuary (the Temple Mount) to perform their devotions in response to the call of the muezzin, and back again to their homes. Ancient men sit smoking hubble-bubbles, while young men call out their wares.

Homes are built on level after level: above the bustle of the narrow lanes and the dark, arched passageways rises a whole neighbourhood of town-houses and flats, often in stone Ottoman-period buildings, crumbling with age, that may preserve Crusader or Mamluke architectural remnants. Chronic overcrowding creates its own stresses: there may be ten people crammed into a room, as permission is rarely given for extensions to be built, even though the birth rate is high.

For the children, life takes place in the street. There is precious little physical space for them to grow up in: they can't do normal childhood things, like sitting down in the house and doing art, or having a story read to them because the space is too tiny and too full. So the children have to live in the warren of the streets – a great place for hide and seek, but hardly convenient for ever-popular football. They live a restricted life, and there are always security cameras watching them. They lack many of the elements essential to 'being at home'; there is little sense of personal security – security in themselves. They pick up anxiety and fear from their parents, who are stressed because of high unemployment and poverty. Parents get frustrated and snappy and take their frustrations out on the children. Domestic violence is a problem, and it is normal for parents to slap their children. They see it as building strength in the kids. The sense of overcrowding at home and restlessness on the streets is compounded by the fact that, due to under-funding, there is a shortfall of 1,000 classrooms in East Jerusalem; according to a recent report, 14,500 Arab children of school age do not, or cannot, attend school.[1]

The Armenian quarter is a different world. A silent monastic compound centring on the shrine of St James' cathedral, it is peopled by monk-priests, seminarians and the elderly: about 1,500 live in a place which accounts for a sixth of the city's area. The Armenian community has been here since the fourth century, as the quarter has been a place both of pilgrimage for the first Christian nation and of refuge from the land of Armenia, often overrun throughout history by armies and invaders. Children are few, and the place has a tranquillity unknown anywhere else in the city.

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