

Jerusalem and the End-Time

The religious capital of the world

The profound importance of Jerusalem to the three main monotheistic religions, Judaism, Islam and Christianity, makes it the religious capital of the world. Followers of all these religions not only regard Jerusalem as a Holy City, but also as a city that has had particular significance for the founders of their Faith:

1. For Judaism this is the place where Abraham was tested and where God chose to establish his earthly presence among the forefathers of the Jews, a city whose past glories are a mere foreshadowing of future messianic expectations.
2. For Islam Jerusalem is Al Quds, the Holy City, which was at first the *qibla*, the point to which every Muslim had to face when praying. It was also believed that Mohammed once visited the city by night, before receiving his heavenly revelation (Koran 17,1; 53:13-18). However, since Muslims consider Mecca and Medina to be the most holy cities, Jerusalem effectively comes third in the list of cities regarded as holy in Islam.
3. For Christianity, the status of Jerusalem is perhaps not so clear, since the New Testament writers foresaw God's judgment falling on Jerusalem, on account of her rejection of the Messiah and his Church. It was not until the 4th century AD that this city came to be regarded unambiguously by Christians as a Holy City. This change in attitude towards Jerusalem came about as a result of the preaching of St Cyril, Patriarch of Jerusalem. He was the first to promote Jerusalem and the rest of the Holy Land as a 'fifth gospel', through which one could personally come close to the main events of Christ's redemption.

Eschatological importance of Jerusalem

Nevertheless, all that is history. What we often tend to overlook is the fact that Jerusalem's status, as a religious capital for the world's monotheistic religions, is also due to her anticipated role at the end of days, as the location of the final judgment and of the momentous events leading up to this.

This is particularly relevant nowadays because in all three religions eschatological belief has been awakened by an undeniable historical fact of the 20th century: the massive immigration of Jews to the Holy Land.

In Islam, 'Quranic prophecy clearly confirms that, upon the return of the exiled Jews to the Holy Land, the Day of Judgment commences: "*And We said unto the Children of Israel after him: Dwell in the land; but when the promise of the Hereafter (wa'dul akhirati) cometh to pass We shall bring you as a crowd gathered out of various nations*" (Koran 17.104).' (quoted from <http://www.al-qiyamah.org>).

In Judaism, the vast majority of modern orthodox Jews (Religious Zionists) base themselves on the post-exilic prophecies of restoration in the Old Testament

and believe that the return of the Jewish people to the Land of their forefathers, and the establishment of the State of Israel, are precursors to their imminent messianic redemption.

For Christians, also, there are statements in the Gospels that could be interpreted as pointing to a time, just before the end of the age, when the Lord 'will restore the kingdom to Israel' (Acts 1,6-7), after 'the times of the Gentiles will be fulfilled' (Lk 21,24).

So the return of the Jews to the Holy Land has strong religious and spiritual significance for all three religions. Consciously or unconsciously, this undeniable historical fact challenges the faithful of all religions to think *eschatologically*, that is to say to prepare themselves for the final Judgment, and to live their lives, more than ever, in the imminent expectation of the end. The fact that this historical event is most acutely felt in Jerusalem, where the religious presence of the Jews is most evident, may explain why eschatological, not to say apocalyptic, thinking is more lively and vivid here in Jerusalem than perhaps at any other place on the earth.

Eschatological traditions concerning Jerusalem have their origin in the Old Testament prophetic writings that describe the last judgment taking place in the valley (Jer 7,30-34; Isa 22,5; Ezek 39) between Jerusalem and the Mount of Olives (Zech 14), which carries the symbolical name of Jehosaphat, 'God judges' (Joel 4,2.12). Inter-testamental writers developed this theme further and described people from all the world being assembled before the divine Judge in the same valley, now called Kidron, between Gethsemane and the Gihon spring just below the ancient City of David. At the time of judgment, the dead will be raised to stand before the throne of God, "some for everlasting life and others for everlasting shame and disgrace", according to Daniel 12,2. Over the centuries, therefore, this area has been filled with the graves of those who have desired to be the first to receive God's merciful judgment. Just around the corner, to the south of the ancient city, is the valley of Hinnom (Gehinnom), which has given its name to the destiny of those who will receive the judgment of everlasting condemnation (1 Enoch 27,1-4). On the hill above these two valleys of Kidron and Hinnom is city of Jerusalem itself, or Zion, which has given its name to the place where God's presence will be re-established in the world to come.

The geography of Jerusalem has clearly been important for the symbolical development of eschatological thought in all three monotheistic religions, and may partly explain why they have very similar core beliefs about general resurrection and final judgment. However, before concluding that the importance of Jerusalem is entirely symbolical, we would do well to examine the mainline eschatological expectations of each of the three monotheistic religions. If we do this we will see that Jerusalem figures literally, and not just symbolically, in many of the events leading up to the final judgment.

Islamic eschatology

Let us start with Islam (cf. www.islaam.com), whose expectations for the future are largely derived from the Hadith of Mohammed. Before the end-times, Sunni and Shia Muslims believe that their Caliphate will be re-established and that through their Caliph, Islam will dominate the world (these are, in fact, the declared aims of many militant and non-militant Islamic movements including Al Qa'ida and Hamas). At this time they will reclaim Jerusalem from the Jews. The last in the line of Caliphs will be called the *Mahdi*. His rule will be challenged by a leader inspired by the devil, called *Al Dajjal*, who will be supported by a multitude of Jewish people. He will deceive and corrupt many people with his lies.

According to the Hadith, Jesus Christ will then descend in person, as a Muslim, in Damascus. Rather surprisingly for us Christians, he will take his place in prayer behind the *Mahdi*, and will command all true believers to become Muslims. It is said that Jesus will order Christians not to eat pork, and will also correct them in their beliefs about the crucifixion (according to Muslims, Jesus was not crucified and did not die, but was taken up alive into heaven in order to reappear at the End of Time). However the main purpose of his coming will be to lead the Muslims in war against the *Dajjal* and his Jewish supporters (thus confirming his correspondence to the antichrist of Christian tradition). Jesus will encounter the *Dajjal* in Jerusalem and chase him to the gates of the city of Lod, where he will kill him with a spear.

Shortly afterwards Jesus and his faithful will be surrounded at a place called Tur (At-Tur is the Arabic name for the town built upon the Mount of Olives), by the armies of Gog and Magog. They pray to God for deliverance, which comes in the form of worms that infest and kill the adversaries surrounding them. The land is filled with the stench of their corpses, but a rain falls and cleanses it.

Then Jesus will reign with justice and wisdom for 7 years (a different tradition says 40 years), and everyone will prosper. After 7 years, a cold wind will carry away the souls of all those who have been good, leaving only those who were wicked. Satan will tempt them and they will behave like animals, until the blowing of the first trumpet, at whose sound the resurrection will take place. At the sound of the second trumpet, the final Judgment will take place.

Jewish eschatology

Let us compare this Muslim scenario with that of the most representative branch of Judaism. As we have already stated the vast majority of modern orthodox Jews (Religious Zionists) believe that the return of the Jewish people to the Land of their forefathers, and the establishment of the State of Israel, are precursors to their imminent redemption through a leader they will call their messiah. This redemption is conceived as the historical restoration of their full political and religious sovereignty in the land of their forefathers. As a result of this redemption, the Jewish

people will be vindicated over other nations, and through the leadership of their messiah the whole world will be restored (*Tikun HaOlam*) and all its inhabitants will experience peace and prosperity.

In order to prevent false messianic movements within Judaism, Maimonides in the 12th Century defined very precisely who their messiah should be and what he would do (Mishneh Torah, Book 14: Judges, Treatise 5 [Kings and Wars], chs. 11-12) and these rules are now binding from the point of view of Jewish religious law: their messiah will be an observant Jew who will succeed in bringing the entire Jewish people to keep the Torah, in defeating their enemies (and winning the famous battle of Gog and Magog), in bringing the exiles back to Israel, and, finally, in building the third temple in its place. Please take note: the coming of their messiah and the arrival of their redemption await the literal completion of the building of the temple in its place on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.

Their messiah will be like Moses, and his coming will be confirmed by a religious leader, who will be like Elijah. Their mission will prepare the Jews for the final judgment and resurrection at an unknown time in the future. Since all Jews will have repented by then, all will be considered righteous. The final judgment will mainly be an occasion for the punishment of the wicked gentiles, and the abolition of their nations. After the final judgment, God will live among men and the earth will be like it was in paradise, as described in Isaiah 11,6-9: "Then the wolf will be a guest of the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; the calf and the young lion shall browse together, with a little child to guide them..."

Some brief reflections

Before going on to speak about the Christian point of view, it is important to note, firstly, that we are talking about well-developed religious beliefs, which tend to be the strongest and most enduring of all beliefs, at the same time influencing the thoughts and motivating the actions of those who hold them.

Secondly we should note that both Islam and Judaism claim to be essential instruments for putting everything right in the world and preparing it for judgment: for Islam, the Islamic caliph must rule the world under Islamic Law in order to prepare it for judgment, and for Judaism, their political messiah is the one who will repair the world and prepare it for judgment. We have here a kind of spiritual competition for the salvation of the world.

Thirdly, the Islamic and Jewish expectations interact in such a way that they reinforce each other: on one hand, the violent attempts by Muslims to reclaim Jerusalem and the Holy Land can be interpreted by the Jews as the wars which their future messiah will win convincingly, giving him the opportunity to rebuild the third temple; on the other hand, the Jewish leader who will then claim to be the messiah, will be interpreted by Muslims as the *Dajjal*, who they say will finally be defeated by the Muslim armies led by Jesus at his coming.

In these two sets of eschatological (end-time) beliefs, one sees all the elements of a final conflict between the two sides. In view of the deterministic and uncompromising nature of these beliefs, and the fact that both religions zealously claim to be divinely ordained to prepare the world for judgment, the final conflict appears inevitable and unavoidable, so long as Jews will be Jews and Muslims will be Muslims.

Furthermore, we can already see important elements of this scenario in the Arab-Israeli conflict, with important roles being played by extremist groups on both sides. On the one hand are the religious Zionists who are against any territorial compromise, and on the other hand the militant Islamists who are struggling on a global scale to re-establish their Caliphate, and retake all of Israel and Jerusalem for the Muslims.

Christian eschatology

So what do Christians make of all this? Firstly it is important to say that the Arab-Israeli conflict is very divisive among Christians. In general the traditional churches tend to be supportive of the Arab position, whilst the newer fundamentalist movements (Christian Zionists) tend to be more supportive of Israel.

But this division amongst Christians is also a result of misunderstanding of the basic nature of the conflict. As outlined above it is not, by any means, a purely political affair, which can be solved by negotiations, compromises and human justice. There is an essential spiritual component, fuelled by spiritual pride as well as irreconcilable eschatological hopes, beliefs and expectations. The only way Christians can rightly respond is through spiritual insight, and here we are greatly helped by our own eschatological prophecies, of which there are several in the NT, the main one being the Apocalypse.

This is not the place to enter into a detailed analysis of the Apocalypse, or any other NT prophecy. All that is needed is to make a few simple observations about the text, and its relevance to the present situation here in the Middle East. Firstly, a proper understanding of Christian prophecy enables us to reject both the Muslim and Jewish versions described above:

1. Jesus was indeed crucified for our sins, and he will never want to change this understanding, or invite us to deny this, as the Muslims presently do.
2. On the other hand, Jesus is the true Messiah who has already started the process of redemption, which the Jews so fervently await at the hands of a political leader who will rebuild their temple in its place. In Christian eyes, such a figure would indeed be the ultimate antagonist of Jesus Christ – the antichrist – since he would be claiming to fulfill the redemptive mission of Jesus.

Christians will need to be strong in their faith to resist being deceived by either the Islamic or Jewish versions of redemption.

Secondly, it should be said that the eschatological prophecy that is given to us in the text of the Apocalypse (Rev 8 to the end) actually confirms the terrible scenario that we have worked out above from the interaction of the eschatological beliefs of the Muslims and the Jews. The Holy City, Jerusalem, will be profaned for a short period (Rev 11,2.8), during which two false messianic figures will reign (the two Beasts described in Rev 13). The temple will be rebuilt (this is alluded to in 13,13) and people will be forced to participate in some kind of cultic activity based on the personality of the so-called messiah (Rev 13,11-17). It will be a time of unprecedented persecution for those who resist these deceptions, but it will last only a short time before a final battle takes place at 'Harmagedon' (Rev 16,16; 19,11-21). This is followed immediately by the general resurrection, the final judgment, the condemnation of evil, and the perfect realization, on earth, of God's promises for mankind (Rev 20,7 to the end).

In his grace, the Lord does not expect everyone to struggle to understand the symbols of this prophecy. Instead, he empowers two Christians to prophesy these things, here in Jerusalem, just before they happen, so that all the faithful will be ready for them (Rev 11,3-13). Our role as Christians, then, is not to support one side or the other, but to bear witness, up to death if necessary, to both Muslims and Jews that the true redemption is through Jesus Christ. In this way we believe that many Muslims and Jews will come to be saved from the irreconcilable hatred, conflict and blasphemy into which their religious beliefs are leading them.

A talk first given by John and Gloria Ben-Daniel in Jerusalem, to a group of pilgrims in September 2005.