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the Earliest Times to A.D. 70: Volume 1

George Adam Smith

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

THE ESSENTIAL CITY

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HIGH up on the back of a long mountain range, between its eastern flank which is the last bulwark against the Arabian desert, and its western which is the side of the vaster basin of the Mediterranean, lies Jerusalem, facing the desert and the sirocco, yet so close to the edge of the basin as to feel the full sweep of its rains and humid winds. The sea is some thirty-four miles away, washing a bleak coast without harbours. On the other side, the range is separated from the Arabian plateau by the profound trench of the Jordan and Dead Sea; but the desert has crossed the trench, and climbs to within a few miles of the City-gates. The site is a couple of rocky spurs, lower than the surrounding summits of the range, but entrenched from them on three sides by abrupt ravines, in one of which lies the only certain spring of the district. There is no river nor perennial stream, and no pass nor natural high-road across the mountain. The back of the range offers a rough pasture, which in the rainy season spreads out upon the desert, but is suitable only to the smaller kinds of cattle. The limestone terraces and slopes are among the best in all the world for the olive and the vine, but there are comparatively few fields for grain. The broad plains of Palestine are far off, and more open to other countries than commanded by her own hills. Even further away are the nearest metals and salts.

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[More information](#)

Geographically considered the City is the product of two opposite systems of climate and culture. She hangs on the watershed between East and West, between the Desert and the Sea: central but aloof, defensible but not commanding, with some natural resources but bare of many of the necessaries of life. Left alone by the main currents of the world's history, Jerusalem had been but a small highland township, her character compounded of the rock, the olive and the desert: conscious, by right of such a position, of her distinctness and jealous of her freedom; drawing, from her cultivation of that slow but generous tree, the love of peace, habits of industry and the civic instinct; but touched besides by the more austere and passionate influences of the desert. Sion, 'the Rock-fort,' Olivet and Gethsemane, 'The Oilpress,' the Tower of the Flock, and the Wilderness of the Shepherds, would still have been names typical of her life, and the things they illustrate have remained the material substance of her history to the present day.

But she became the bride of Kings and the mother of Prophets. The Prophets, sons only of that national and civic life of which the Kings had made her the centre, repaid her long travail and training of their genius by the supreme gift of an answer to the enigmas of her life: blew by their breath into imperishable flame the meaning of her tardy and ambiguous history. She knew herself chosen of God, a singular city in the world, with a mission to mankind. And though her children became divided between a stupid pride in her privilege and a frequent apostasy to other faiths, for she had heathen blood in her from the beginning, God never left Himself without witnesses in her midst, nor ceased to strive with her. She felt

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*The Essential City*

5

His Presence, she was adjured of His love, and, as never another city on earth has been, of His travail for her worthiness of the destiny to which He had called her.

Few cities have been so often or so cruelly besieged, so torn by faction, so sapped by treachery, so inflammable to riot, so drenched with blood. The forces of her progress and her re-actions have been equally intolerant, and almost equally savage in their treatment of each other.

Yet it has not been in this ceaseless human strife that the real tragedy of Jerusalem has consisted—except in so far as both sides were together but one side of the more awful contest through the ages between the Spirit of God and the spirit of man. Nowhere else has this universal struggle been waged so consciously, so articulately as in Jerusalem. Nowhere else have its human responsibilities and its Divine opportunities been so tragically developed. The expostulations of souls like Jeremiah's and Habakkuk's with the decrees of Providence and the burdens of Its will have been answered from their own hearts, and those of other prophets, in the assurance of an infinitely more anxious travail and agony waged by God Himself with reluctant man for the understanding of His will, the persuasion of His mercy, and the acceptance of His discipline towards higher stages of character and vision. It is to-day the subject of half the world's worship and of the wonder of the rest, that both these elements in the long religious history of Jerusalem culminated and were combined in the experience of Jesus Christ within and around her walls: on the one hand, in His passionate appeals to the City to turn to Him, as though all the sovereign love and fatherly yearning of God were with Him; and on the other, in His Temptation, His agony of

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[More information](#)

submission to the Divine will, and His Crucifixion. So that Sion and Olivet, the Wilderness and Gethsemane, their earthly meanings almost forgotten, have become the names of eternal facts in the history of the relations of God and man.

From another point of view, and with more detail, we may present this essential history of the City as follows.

The life of even the meanest of towns cannot be written apart from the general history of the times through which it has flourished. While still but a hill-fort, with centuries of obscurity before her, Jerusalem held a garrison for the Pharaoh of the day, and corresponded with him in the characters of the Babylonian civilisation.

When such a town, suddenly, without omen, augury or promise of national renown, becomes, as Jerusalem did under David, the capital of a kingdom, her historian is drawn to explore, it may be at a distance from herself, the currents of national life which have surprised her, and the motives of their convergence upon so unexpected a centre. His horizon is the further widened, if the capital which she has become be that of a restless nation upon the path of great empires: tremulous to all their rumour, and provoking, as Jerusalem did from the days of Sennacherib to those of Hadrian, the interference of their arms.

Yet this range of political interest opened to our City only as the reflection of that more sacred fame which dawned upon her when, with Isaiah, the one monotheism of the ancient world was identified with the inviolableness of her walls; when with Deuteronomy and Josiah the ritual of that religion was concentrated upon her shrine, and the One Temple came to be regarded as equally essential to religion with faith in the One God. Not only

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*The Essential City*

7

did the Country, already much diminished, shrink in consequence to be the mere fringe of the City, within whose narrow walls a whole nation, conscious of a service to humanity, henceforth experienced the most powerful crises of their career; not only did her sons learn to add to the pride of such a citizenship the idealism and passionate longing which only exile breeds; but among alien and far away races the sparks were kindled of a love and an eagerness for the City almost as jealous as those of her own children.

So lofty an influence was exercised by Jerusalem some centuries before the appearance of Jesus Christ; yet it was only prophetic of the worship she drew from the whole world as the scene of His Passion, His Cross and His Grave. Though other great cities of Christendom, Antioch, Alexandria, Carthage and Rome, were by far her superiors in philosophy and spiritual empire, Jerusalem remained the religious centre of the earth—whose frame was even conceived as poised upon her rocks—the home of the Faith, the goal of most distant pilgrimages, and the original of the heavenly City, which would one day descend from God among men. By all which memories and beliefs the passions of mankind were let loose upon her. She became as Armageddon. Two world-wide religions made her their battle-ground, hurling their farthest kings against her walls and shedding upon her dust the tears and the blood of millions of their people. East and West hotly contended for her, no longer because she was alive, but in devotion to the mere shell of the life that had gone from her. Then, though still a focus in the diplomacy of empires and the shrine of several forms of faith, her politics were reduced to intrigue and her religion overlaid with super-

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stitution, for generations hardly touched by any visible heroism or even romance.

In all it has been thirty-three centuries of history, climbing slowly to the Central Fact of all time, and then toppling down upon itself in a ruin that has almost obliterated the scenes and monuments of the life which set her Alone among the cities of the world.

The bare catalogue of the disasters which have overtaken Jerusalem is enough to paralyse her topographer. Besides the earthquakes which have periodically rocked her foundations,¹ the City has endured nearly twenty sieges and assaults of the utmost severity, some involving a considerable, others a total, destruction of her walls and buildings;² almost twenty more blockades or military occupations, with the wreck or dilapidation of prominent edifices; the frequent alteration of levels by the razing of rocky knolls and the filling of valleys; about eighteen reconstructions, embellishments, and large extensions, including the imposition of novel systems of architecture, streets, drains and aqueducts, athwart the lines of the old; the addition of suburbs and the abandonment of parts of the inhabited area; while over all there gathered the dust and the waste of ordinary manufacture and commerce. Even such changes might not have been fatal to the restoration of the ancient topography, had the traditions which they interrupted been immediately resumed. But there also have happened two intervals of silence, after Nebuchadrezzar and after Hadrian, during which the City lay almost if not altogether desolate, and her natives were banished from her; five abrupt passages from one religion to another, which even more disastrously severed the con-

¹ Below, Bk. i. ch. iv. ² For these and following statistics, see App. I.

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[More information](#)*The Essential City*

9

tinuity of her story ; more than one outbreak of fanatic superstition creating new and baseless tradition ; as well as the long, careless chatter about the holy sites which has still further confused or obliterated the genuine memories of the past.

Before we put our hands to this *débris*, and stir its dust with the breath of a hundred controversies, it is necessary to fill in that general view of the position of the City which we have just taken with some detail of her surroundings and atmosphere ; and of the common life which, under every change of empire and of religion, has throbbled through her streets to the present day.

Jerusalem lies upon the mountain-range of Judæa, about 2400 feet above the sea, and some thirty-four miles from the coast of the Mediterranean. From the latter she is separated by a plain, which during the greater part of her history was in the hands of an alien and generally hostile race ; by low foot-hills ; and by the flank and watershed of the range itself. From the west, therefore, except for its rains and its winds, we must realise that Jerusalem stood almost completely aloof. The most considerable valley in the mountains on this side of her, after starting from the watershed a little to the north of her walls, drives its deep trench southward, as if to cut her off more rigorously from the maritime plain and the sea. Travellers by the modern road from Jaffa will remember how after this has seemed, by a painful ascent from Bab-el-Wâd, to attain the level of the City, it has to wind down the steep sides of the Wady Bêt-Ḥaninâ or Kuloniyeh, and then wind up again to the watershed. The only pass from the west that can be said to debouch upon Jerusalem is a

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narrow and easily defended gorge, up which the present railway has been forced, but which can never have been used as a road of approach either by armies or by commercial caravans. Hence nearly all the great advances on Jerusalem have been made, even by Western Powers in command of the plain, either from further north, by the Beth-horon road, or from further south—by the passes upon Hebron and Bethlehem; and then, in either case, along the backbone of the range, by the one main route near which the City stands.

Nor is Jerusalem perched upon the watershed itself, but lies upon the first narrow plateau to the east of this. As you stand at the Jaffa gate and look west, the watershed is the top of the first slope in front of you, and it shuts out all prospect of the west even from the towers and house-tops. The view to the north is almost as short—hardly farther than to where the head of the hidden Wâdy Bêt-Ḥanîna—the precise water-parting—comes over into the faint beginnings of the valley of the Ḳidron, draining south-east to the Dead Sea. Above the course of this valley and between it and the watershed the ground slopes obliquely from the north-west. Just before the city-walls are reached, it divides into two spurs or promontories running south between the Ḳidron and the Wâdy er-Rabâbi and separated from each other by the now shallow glen, El-Wâd, once known as the Tyropœon. These spurs form the site of the city. Without going into the details of their configuration, we find enough for our present purpose in observing that the western is the higher of the two, and that running as they do southwards, the dip of them¹ and therefore the whole exposure of the city is to the east.

¹ According to Conder the dip of the strata is about 10° E.S.E.