

Holy Land Divided

ALICE BOASE

To visit the Holy Land must be the dearest ambition of every Christian. To live in it as I have done for more than five years is a rare and wonderful privilege.

Even so my picture of the Holy Land is incomplete, for it has been tragically divided since the Jewish-Arab war of 1948 led to its partition between Israel and Jordan. The two countries are still at enmity, so the cleavage is absolute. Even the Holy City is rent in two, for the western suburbs have been developed to form Israel's capital, while the eastern region, including the Old City, belongs to Jordan.

At an ordinary level there is no communication at all between the two countries, or even between the two halves of Jerusalem. Only diplomats and United Nations officials may move between the two with relative freedom, and by a special arrangement, tourists are allowed to pass—but not re-pass—from one to the other. For those like myself—and I am an Irish woman living in Jordan by reason of my husband's employment—there are no such concessions. Never once in the years I have lived in Jerusalem have I set foot on the soil of Israel which lies only a few hundred yards west of our house.

To begin with I found this situation frustrating in the extreme, for from our windows we can clearly see people and cars moving about in the other Jerusalem which is so near—and yet so very far away. Gradually I have become resigned to the knowledge that I am never likely to see Galilee or Nazareth, which together with a great many places of purely historical interest, are 'on the other side'.

Jordan has many compensations to offer. Through the narrow winding streets of the Old City one may follow the Via Dolorosa to Calvary and the tomb of our Lord which are both enshrined in the church of the Holy Sepulchre. Below the eastern walls, Gethsemane lies at the foot of the Mount of Olives, and Bethlehem and Bethany are within short driving distance of the city. The Jordan valley, four thousand spectacular feet below Jerusalem, is full of religious and historical significance, and enthralling expeditions may be made to such places as Qumrân, where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found, Jerash of the Roman Decapolis, and even to Petra, the famous 'rose-red city'.

The pilgrim must of necessity crowd so much into a few precious days that he has little opportunity to assimilate the unique atmosphere of this country which has remained essentially unaltered since the time of our Lord. Yet I have found my deepest satisfaction in merely looking at a countryside which would still be familiar to his eyes; in visiting the Garden of Gethsemane, where gnarled olive-trees, believed to be over two thousand years old, may perhaps have witnessed his agony; and in following the stony tracks over the Mount of Olives which he knew so well.

In spite of a good deal of superficial 'progress', the people of this country still cling to the customs and traditions of a bygone day, and the Bible takes on a new and richer meaning as one sees so many of the scenes it describes re-enacted in everyday life. The man on a donkey is as familiar now as then, and the people who fill the streets of the Old City might have stepped out of the pages of ancient history. Men still favour the white headcloth known as the kafia, and the long, striped galabieh, so reminiscent of Joseph's coat of many colours. The women wear a tunic-like dress, richly embroidered on the bodice, and cover their hair with a veil such as popular devotion associates with the Blessed Virgin.

For the pilgrim with little time to spare, the Holy Places must naturally take priority, and one has sadly to admit that the most important ones have suffered over the centuries at the hands of those whose only desire was to beautify and embellish. This is especially the case in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre where one longs to see the tomb in its natural state—a plain, rock-hewn cavity such as one may still find on any Judean hillside, and Calvary itself, infinitely moving in its stark simplicity. One remembers, none the less, that in the course of Jerusalem's long and stormy history, their memory would, thus, hardly have survived. Often, indeed, the authenticity of a site has been established by the remains of a church or shrine, so we owe a debt of gratitude to those early Christians through whose efforts their sacred associations were preserved.

It is at first distressing to find that here, in the very heart of Christianity, Christians seem to be so sadly at variance. The church of the Holy Sepulchre itself is shared by no less than six Christian rites. Latin (as the Catholic Church in this country is usually known), Greek, Armenian and Syrian Orthodox, Coptic and Ethiopian, although the latter have no more than a precarious foothold on the roof of St Helen's chapel. A representative of each rite is in constant attendance, jealously guarding its privileges, while a final note of irony is supplied

by the Moslem custodians, lounging on the divans within the doorway.

In Bethlehem the situation is rather better, for although the church of the Nativity belongs solely to the Greek Orthodox, the Catholics have direct access to the grotto from their adjacent church of St Catherine. A short distance from Bethlehem the 'Shepherds' Fields' are still very much as they have been for countless centuries. Only the ruins of a Byzantine monastery and a tiny modern church of touching simplicity distinguish the area from the surrounding hillsides.

Anyone fortunate enough to be able to visit the Holy Places frequently finds that after a time one ceases to notice the tawdry trimmings and has an increasing awareness of their basic reality. Even the initial impression of disunity lessens as one hears of incidents of friendliness and co-operation between the Christian communities. As an example of this, the Anglicans, whose cathedral close of St George is a short distance from the Old City, are at present building a theological college, and look forward to enjoying the outstanding facilities provided by the library at St Stephen's, the Dominican Priory and centre of the world-renowned *Ecole Biblique*.

On the part of the Moslems, too, there is a very large measure of tolerance, for Christians only account for 150,000 of Jordan's total population of 1,700,000. No restrictions are placed on religious practice, and, although Christians rarely attain the highest positions in the land, they hold many responsible ones and are very much to the fore in business and the professions.

It is as well to understand that for the Moslems, too, Jerusalem is a place of pilgrimage, only second to Mecca for its sacred associations with the prophet. On Fridays people pour into the Old City to attend the mosque and do their shopping. During the month preceding the Feast of Ramadan, numbers grow and fervour mounts till it almost seems as if the ancient walls will burst! Even so, Christians may accompany the Franciscan Fathers along the Way of the Cross, then as on every Friday throughout the year, and although the procession must cause acute inconvenience as it crosses the main shopping-centre, the crowd stands respectfully aside and it is rare indeed to see even a gesture of impatience.

At the time of the partition, some 150,000 Arabs elected to remain on the Israel side rather than abandon their homes. There are a good many Christians among them—notably in Nazareth—and at Easter and Christmas the regulations are relaxed so that they may celebrate the festivals with their people in Jordan.

Perhaps fortunately, the Eastern Churches in the Holy Land follow the Julian calendar, so not all the Christians come over at the same time. Even so as many as six thousand may cross, queueing for hours while papers are scrutinized at both sides of the frontier between the two Jerusalems. Meanwhile, relatives wait in anxious uncertainty, never knowing if their patience will be rewarded by a joyful re-union or the bitter disappointment of an unexplained non-appearance. Those who are lucky will be together for forty-eight hours, and then the visitors must return whence they came.

Archaeologists are always busy in Jerusalem—and, in fact, throughout the Holy Land—and are gradually extending its time-old history, but from the Christian angle two comparatively recent discoveries, which date back to only a mere two thousand years ago, are of particular interest.

The first of these is the Lithostrotos, believed to have formed part of the paved courtyard of the Antonia fortress, which came to light accidentally when the convent of the Sisters of Zion was being built. Many people think that this was the scene of our Lord's trial by Pilate and that it was here he was mocked and buffeted by the soldiers. Cut into the huge flagstones are games with which the guards would while away the time; notably one sees the crown and sword associated with the game 'Basilikos' in which they are known to have used our Lord as the central figure. Beneath the Lithostrotos are vast cisterns of the Herodian era from which the convent draws its water to this day.

The other discovery was the result of much patient excavation on the slopes of Mount Zion by the Assumptionist Fathers. Early records showed that the House of Caiaphas was in this area and that churches dedicated to St Peter had been built on the site and successively destroyed between the fifth and fourteeneth centuries. Their search was richly rewarded, for they eventually uncovered traces of the churches and very extensive remains of the high priest's establishment. Among the latter is a grim prison cut in the natural rock, and beneath it is a cavern in which our Lord may have spent the hours following his first interrogation. That it was a place regarded with veneration by the early Christians is evident from crosses which were found carved or painted on the rocky walls. Finally they unearthed a paved Herodian roadway leading up the hillside from the Pool of Siloam, by which, it is possible that our Lord could have been brought from Gethsemane to the High Priest's house.

The modern church of St Peter *in Gallicantu* has been built over the

dungeons, but otherwise, as in the case of the Lithostrotos, every effort has been made to leave this place, so closely associated with the early stages of the Passion, in its original state.

The words of the Gospels are vividly alive when one visits the *Dominus Flevit* on the Mount of Olives. Here, in a little modern church built over the remains of an early shrine, the celebrant sees through the wide framework of a window behind the altar a view not so very dissimilar from that which our Lord saw when he gazed, weeping, on Jerusalem. One could, indeed, spend a lifetime here and still have much to learn. The past is all around one, and even the most modest agricultural or building project is likely to uncover a page of history.

Pilgrims and tourists, who are the very life blood of this country so poor in natural resources, are coming in ever-increasing numbers, and I am sometimes asked which is the best time to visit the Holy Land. Undoubtedly, spring and autumn are the most attractive seasons, for this country knows all the climatic extremes, which are far better avoided by those who must see and do so much in a strictly limited time. In spring the harsh countryside sees an almost miraculous transformation, and green fields are starred with myriads of wild flowers—among them the scarlet anemones which are believed to have been the ‘lilies of the field’. But although in autumn the land is bare of vegetation after the long months of drought, and one almost seems to see the very bones of creation, its contours are softened by the mellow sunshine, and it is then that Jerusalem becomes in very truth a golden city.

A Middle Eastern Diary

BEIRUT. To arrive in the Middle East by sea is nowadays a rare, not say an eccentric, experience. It has its advantages. The oil executive's appointments can't wait, and the visiting lecturer has only a day or two to spare, and so the neurotic haste of travel by air communicates itself to these ancient lands, where patience still remains a principal need for understanding.

After the idyllic, empty days, sailing in and out of the islands of Greece—with the reminder which Crete at least supplies of hidden worlds beyond the prepared categories of a Western imagination—Beirut asserts itself in a flashy