

Constructing the Sacred in Late Antiquity: Jerome as a Guide for Christian Identity

Naoki KAMIMURA, Tokyo Gakugei University (kmmrnk@gmail.com)

Jerome's conflict with church leaders and Christian communities in Rome and Jerusalem affected the development of his interest in the sacred geography and the religious significance of visiting holy places. Both cities had functioned as a centre of liturgical, spiritual and pastoral life in the Christian world, thereby serving to change the religious landscape of the late antique society. He did not hesitate to voice his criticism in the scene of local ecclesiastical conflicts. His enthusiasm for shaping a Christian new landscape of sacred sites is not only indicative of his concern for the practice of pilgrimage, but also of his search for a new religious identity that was based on a putative Christian creation of utopia.

Jerome's support for pilgrimage and its religious significance was to be found in many texts which are repeatedly referred to in his letters, such as the rich source of information about his own pilgrimage with his friend and disciple Paula in *Letter* 108 (in 404 written to Eustochium, her daughter) that contains a systematic survey of the holy sites; in *Letter* 53 (in c. 394 to Paulinus of Nola) the emphasis on journeys of study which he claims are indispensable for those who are wishing to deepen their understanding of languages and the scriptures; in *Letter* 76 (in 399 to Theodora) his persuasion to continue her journey and come to the sacred place, and; in the two well-known *Letter* 46 (in 386 to Marcella) and *Letter* 58 (in 395 to Paulinus) Jerome gave mutually contradictory stances, varying from firm support for pilgrimage to the biblical sites to his denunciation of pilgrimage. Some scholars have suggested that Jerome's change in attitude towards pilgrimage and the earthly Jerusalem can be explained as the tension between popular religious phenomena and established Church positions in late antiquity. Others have drawn their attention to the historical context in which his views were given: indeed, when he wrote *Letter* 58 to Paulinus whose hope was to come to Palestine and settle in Jerusalem, Jerome was troubled by the conflict with the church in Jerusalem and reluctant to Paulinus's idea of the visit to Palestine. At that time he had no alternative except to belittle the importance of visiting holy places. It is not the focus of this paper to think about the reason why he changed his views. I would like to restrict myself to a consideration of Jerome's new argument in *Letter* 46, along with the refinement of Christian identity and behaviour of fourth- and fifth-century Christians in the Middle East. I shall draw out how together both the concern for a new identity and the importance of pilgrimage are producing innovation in his perception of sacred sites.

Settings for Letter 46

In the early spring of 386, following his journey with Paula and the settlement in Bethlehem, Jerome wrote a long letter (*Ep.* 46) to Marcella, his influential patroness who had stayed behind in Rome. Although this letter was sent to her in the names of Paula and her daughter Eustochium, most scholars have assumed, as a result of their analysis, that Jerome himself wrote this letter. But this is not made sufficiently clear in what respects Jerome ascribed the letter to the two women. If he chose them as a medium of giving information of pilgrimage, it might seem that he considered them as more worthy of encouraging Marcella to visit the holy places than himself. Marcella, as well as Paula and Eustochium, belonged to the circle of ascetic aristocratic women at Rome. During his stay there, Jerome became their mentor. He had been in a spiritual and intellectual relationship with them, both widows of illustrious birth, and with Eustochium. The reason why he hid behind the voice of Paula might be explained by the close relationship between Paula and Marcella. The question of its authorship is still to be examined.

It is evident from the description of sacred places that Jerome was quite intrigued by the Old and New Testament sites.¹ Not only does he refer to the ‘sepulchre of the Lord’ (John 19:25) and the ‘Mount of Olives with the ascending Lord’ (Acts 1:9, 12), but he also invites her to see the ‘mausoleum of David (1 Kings 2:10) [...] the prophet, Amos, upon his crag blowing his shepherd’s horn’, as well as the ‘the monuments of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, [...] the ashes of John the Baptist, of Elisha, (2 Kings 13:21) and of Obadiah.’ He recommends further that she should see Nazareth, Mount Tabor (Matthew 17:1–9), and Capernaum. Jerome eagerly imagines that Marcella will arrive at ‘the shores of Palestine’ and follow the suggested itinerary with him. By hoping to ‘clasp you by the hand, [...] look upon your face; [...] at last embrace you’, he shows himself to be a devout pilgrim to encounter the holy places.

Jerome chooses to quote a passage from Genesis (12:1), taking it as a starting point for his discussion of pilgrimage, a discussion in which he indicates to Marcella that it was God’s first command to Abraham: ‘Get thee out of thy country and from thy kindred unto a land that I will show thee.’² Jerome also quotes passages from Old Testament in support of this view, thereby providing the biblical basis for the act of pilgrimage. He then switches from the spatial to the temporal aspect: ‘Well, then, to bring forward something still more out of place, we must go back to yet remoter times.’³ The emphasis on the unique history of Jerusalem leads him into confirming that this city has had a privileged position in human history: ‘Tradition has it that in this city, nay, more, on this very spot, Adam lived and died. The place where our Lord was crucified is called Calvary [*scil.* Golgotha], because the skull of the primitive man

1. Jerome, *Ep.* 46.13; CSEL 54, 343.7–23.

2. Jerome, *Ep.* 46.2; CSEL 54, 330.12–13. English translation is taken from NPNF 2.6, trans. W.H. Fremantle, G. Lewis and W.G. Martley (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing, 1893).

3. Jerome, *Ep.* 46.3; CSEL 54, 331.24–332.1.

was buried there.⁴ He maintains that this tradition affords a proof of the special status of Jerusalem: there has been the ‘prophets and holy men who have been sent forth from this place.’⁵ He adds the etymological explanations of its names: these names, first Jebus, then Salem, then Jerusalem, correspond to the teaching of the Trinity and reveals themselves to be the vision of our faith.

The Main Argument of the Letter

In contrast to the claim that his adversaries have offered on the prophesied destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple (Matt. 23:37–38),⁶ Jerome directs his attention to the sayings from both Josephus’s *The Jewish War* (6.5) and the command of Jesus to the apostles (Matt. 28:19 and Acts 13:46): ‘all the spiritual importance of Judaea (*omne sacramentum Iudaeae*) and its old intimacy with God were transferred by the apostles to the nations.’⁷ Although it seems likely that its privileged status was limited only to the past, he provides a clear answer to this problem.

The difficulty is strongly stated, and may well puzzle even those proficient in Scripture; but for all that, it admits of an easy solution. The Lord wept for the fall of Jerusalem (Luke 19:41–42), and He would not have done so if He did not love it. He wept for Lazarus because He loved him (John 11:35–36).⁸

Such is the way Jerome takes the scriptural texts to establish the validity of his claim. Further development of his argument is to be found in the connection between divine abandonment of Jerusalem and the sins of its residents. In other words, the loftiness of the city is to be differentiated from the people who offended against God.

The truth is that it was the people who sinned and not the place. The capture of a city is involved in the slaying of its inhabitants. If Jerusalem was destroyed, it was that its people might be punished.⁹

After making the point that its abandoned state is linked with Jerusalem’s inhabitants, he disconnects its Jewish past from the place as a Christian city. Thus, he does not agree with the view that this city is no longer less worthy of honour. He intends to free the city as a whole as far as possible from its Jewish past, thereby showing that the destruction of Jerusalem does not represent its abandonment by God.

Jerome continues to consider the holiness of this city. By shifting the focus of his argument to seeing the tomb of Jesus, he illustrates the significance of its religious experience.

4. Jerome, *Ep.* 46.3; CSEL 54, 332.1–5.

5. Jerome, *Ep.* 46.3; CSEL 54, 332.9–10.

6. Matt. 23:37–38: ‘O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you that killest the prophets, and stone them which are sent unto you; how often would I have gathered your children together even as a hen gathers her chickens under her wings, and you would not. Behold your house is left unto you desolate.’

7. Jerome, *Ep.* 46.4; CSEL 54, 334.2–4.

8. Jerome, *Ep.* 46.5; CSEL 54, 334.5–9.

9. Jerome, *Ep.* 46.5; CSEL 54, 334.9–11.

He asks Marcella to think about his visit to the holy place: ‘As often as we enter it we see the Saviour in His grave clothes, and if we linger we see again the angel sitting at His feet, and the napkin folded at His head.’¹⁰ Here Jerome provides her not only with a vivid account of his perception but also with the power of an experience that urges her to contemplate the past event. The idea that people have to see and touch the holy places is confirmed by reference to Isaiah 11:10 ‘his rest shall be glorious’ with which he writes that ‘the place of the Lord’s burial should be held in universal honor.’¹¹ It is noteworthy that Jerome here imposes a new duty on Christians to visit the tomb of Jesus. But this does not originate in the scriptural tradition. How does he support his claim?

When it comes to showing that Jesus was crucified at Jerusalem which could be interpreted as Sodom and Egypt (Rev. 11:8: ‘the great city [*scil.* Jerusalem] which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified’),¹² his position is more problematic. Jerome faces the problem of how it is possible that Sodom could be a holy place. He considers how this difficulty is handled by going beyond its literal meaning and accepting a new interpretation of Revelation. His task is both to eliminate any possible confusion between Sodom and the earthly Jerusalem and to argue against the interpretation of connecting it with the heavenly Jerusalem. Jerome refers to the passage from Revelation 11:1–2 in which ‘he [*scil.* John] speaks of Jerusalem as the holy city.’¹³ He thus expresses a certainty as to the possibility of defining the term ‘holy city’ as the heavenly Jerusalem and of showing ‘that which is called Sodom is the earthly one tottering to its downfall.’¹⁴ Because of the difficulties of making possible a coherent interpretation of Revelation, he resorts to the passages from Revelation 21 in which the new Jerusalem, that is, the holy city within John’s vision of ‘a new heaven and a new earth’ (21:1) is depicted as the ‘great city’ in its spiritual dimension (21:16–18). However, his interpretation seems not to be straightforward. Jerome interprets it mystically: this ‘great city’ is the one ‘which Cain first built’ (Genesis 4:17),¹⁵ which ‘must be taken to represent this world.’¹⁶ It is called Sodom and Egypt.¹⁷ In so far as it is fixed as the world that sinned and was rebuilt, it becomes clear that this city is not Jerusalem but rather stands for this world: the new Jerusalem in Revelation is neither the heavenly nor the earthly one. Likewise in the following section, Jerome rejects the connection between

10. Jerome, *Ep.* 46.5; CSEL 54, 334.17–21.

11. Jerome, *Ep.* 46.5; CSEL 54, 334.23–24.

12. Jerome, *Ep.* 46.6; CSEL 54, 335.3–5.

13. Jerome, *Ep.* 46.6; CSEL 54, 335.18–19.

14. Jerome, *Ep.* 46.6; CSEL 54, 335.21–22.

15. Jerome, *Ep.* 46.7; CSEL 54, 336.21.

16. Jerome, *Ep.* 46.7; CSEL 54, 336.22.

17. Jerome, *Ep.* 46.7; CSEL 54, 336.24–25.

Egypt and the earthly city: ‘We never read of Egypt as put for Jerusalem: it always stands for this world.’¹⁸ He confirms that the designation was never given to Jerusalem in the scriptures.

His View of the Earthly Jerusalem

Jerome then considers the high status of the earthly Jerusalem. He mentions Matthew 27:52–53 in order to provide proof of his claim: ‘and the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints which slept arose and came out of the graves after his resurrection, and went into the holy city and appeared unto many.’¹⁹ This passage would be interpreted as showing that the ‘holy city’ is not the heavenly Jerusalem: ‘the apparition there of the bodies of the saints could be no sign to men of the Lord’s rising’²⁰, although he knows well about different interpretation that regards the ‘holy city’ as the heavenly Jerusalem. It would be possible to say that his way of treating the verses makes it serve his purpose. Indeed, he is aware of the necessity of tangible evidence for Christians to demonstrate their faith. He adds further support to his argument.

Since, therefore, the evangelists and all the Scriptures speak of Jerusalem as the holy city, and since the psalmist commands us to ‘worship the Lord at his footstool;’ (Ps. 131:7, LXX) allow no one to call it Sodom and Egypt, for by it the Lord forbids men to swear because ‘it is the city of the great king.’ (Matth. 5:35)²¹

It is noteworthy that he quotes a part of the passage from Psalm 131:7: ‘Let us go into his tabernacle: let us worship at his footstool.’ He suggests that we should worship Jesus’ burial place. His concern for the construction of sacred geography seems to be prominent in his interpretation of Psalm 132:7 as the reference to the obligation of Christians to visit and worship at Jesus’ tomb. He turns his attention to the religious and intellectual rewards received from the act of pilgrimage.

since the Lord’s ascension, [...] the bishops, the martyrs, the divines, who have come to Jerusalem from a feeling that their *devotion* and *knowledge* would be incomplete and their *virtue* without the finishing touch, unless they adored Christ in the very spot where the gospel first flashed from the gibbet.²² (Italics mine)

When he describes what it is that he appreciates in this mode of religious behaviour, he gives of the desirable characteristics—devotion, knowledge and virtue—to be looked for in those who he supposes have completed ‘a Christian’s education’²³ by the worship at a particular place. This is the innovative aspect to be stressed in his argument. Here the connection

18. Jerome, *Ep.* 46.7; CSEL 54, 337.5–6.

19. Jerome, *Ep.* 46.7; CSEL 54, 337.25–338.1.

20. Jerome, *Ep.* 46.7; CSEL 54, 338.2–4.

21. Jerome, *Ep.* 46.7; CSEL 54, 338.4–9.

22. Jerome, *Ep.* 46.9; CSEL 54, 339.7–13.

23. Jerome, *Ep.* 46.9; CSEL 54, 339.18–19.

between the rewards of pilgrimage and an effective way of forging Christian identity seems to have combined to form a basis for the pursuit of religious practice: visiting a unique earthly site is an obligation for Christians of his day. Fulfilling this obligation it is natural that they should also share his perception of pilgrimage and the earthly Jerusalem.

Concluding Remarks

Jerome repeats and elaborates his view about the importance of the earthly Jerusalem in the concluding part of this letter. His focus on its significance is put forward in hypothetical defence that he does not intend 'to deny that the kingdom of God is within or to say that there are no holy men elsewhere'.²⁴ He continues to support what he says by reference to Psalm 132:7. Although he has no intention of justifying a restriction of divine presence in a special place, but in trying to defend the privileged status of the earthly Jerusalem, he reminds the reader of his own experience: 'we have come hither to see the first of all nations.'²⁵ Jerome and his friends visited and settled there, as well as the 'bishops, the martyrs, the divines, who have come to Jerusalem.'²⁶ For it is clear that 'Of all the ornaments of the Church our company of monks and virgins is one of the finest'.²⁷ With regard to their way of life, Jerome turns the attention to the virtues of the monks and virgins: 'there is no arrogance, no disdain of self-restraint; all strive after humility, that greatest of Christian virtues.'²⁸ Thus, it is not surprising that he avoids the possibility that other places can be suggested as a satisfactory substitute for Jerusalem's position.

Jerome concludes his letter, in showing the authenticity of the Old and New Testament sites in Jerusalem. It is interesting to note that he does not prefer to treat the problem of pilgrimage from its theological viewpoint of the omnipresence of divinity but would rather draw explicit attention to some passages in the scriptures in order to confirm the holiness of the earthly city. In contrast to the traditional view of the 'heavenly Jerusalem' and 'New Jerusalem', which rejects any spiritual role for sacred earthly space, he attempts to endow Jerusalem with the high status, thereby playing a crucial role of the act of pilgrimage and the emergence of sacred geography. Jerome's attitude towards the positive images of Jerusalem is that it reveals his eager for the construction of a Christian way of life and also that, by virtue of the intellectual and religious rewards from pilgrimage, it expresses his search for the moral way of life and behaviour.

24. Jerome, *Ep.* 46.10; CSEL 54, 339.20–21.

25. Jerome, *Ep.* 46.10; CSEL 54, 339.24–25.

26. Jerome, *Ep.* 46.9; CSEL 54, 339.8–9.

27. Jerome, *Ep.* 46.10; CSEL 54, 339.25–26.

28. Jerome, *Ep.* 46.10; CSEL 54, 340.12–14.