

THE SITE OF THE CHURCH OF ST. MARY AT JERUSALEM, BUILT BY THE EMPEROR JUSTINIAN.

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It appears to be generally assumed that the great basilica of St. Mary, which was built by Justinian in the sixth century, was situated somewhere in the Haram area near the site of the Temple of the Jews. Some writers place it at the spot now occupied by the Mosque of Aksa, while the late Mr. Fergusson was positive that it stood at the south-eastern corner of the Haram, overlooking the Valley of Cedron.

The study of another question in connection with ancient sites in Jerusalem directed my attention to the subject, and led me to examine into the reasons for assuming that the church was built in or near the Haram. The result of my investigation has brought me to the conclusion that it is improbable that the church was within the Haram, and that it is more likely that it was erected on Mount Sion in the southern part of the upper city, where the building called the Cœnaculum and Tomb of David now stands. As the question is of considerable importance with reference to the study of the holy sites in Jerusalem, it may be of interest to give the evidence upon which my conclusion is based. In order that others may be able to check without difficulty the quotations on the subject that will be given, I shall only refer to the ancient authors, translations of whose works are given in the publications of the Palestine Pilgrims' Text Society, as this collection, which is sold by the Palestine Exploration Fund, is in the hands of many readers of the *Quarterly Statement*.

The author who has given the most detailed account of the basilica of St. Mary is Procopius, Prefect of Constantinople, who, about the year A.D. 560, wrote a description of the various buildings erected by the Emperor Justinian throughout his dominions. In the fifth book of this work he gives the following account of the construction of the Church of St. Mary¹:—

“At Jerusalem he built a church in honour of the Virgin, to which no other can be compared. The inhabitants call it the ‘New

¹ *Palestine Pilgrims' Texts*, vol. ii. “Procopius,” p. 138.

Church.' I shall describe what it is like, prefacing my account by the remark that the city stands for the most part on hilly ground, which hills are not formed of earth, but are rough and precipitous, so as to make the paths up and down them as steep as ladders. All the rest of the buildings in the city stand in one place, being either built upon the hills or upon flat and open ground; but this church alone stands in a different position, for the Emperor Justinian ordered it to be built upon the highest of the hills, explaining of what size he wished it to be, both in width and in length. The hill was not of sufficient size to enable the work to be carried out according to the Emperor's orders, but a fourth part of the church, that towards the south wind and the rising sun, in which the priests perform the sacred mysteries, was left with no ground upon which to rest. Accordingly those in charge of the work devised the following expedient: they laid foundations at the extremity of the flat ground and constructed a building rising to the same height as the hill. When it reached the summit, they placed vaults upon the walls and joined the building to the other foundations of the church; so that this church in one place is built upon a firm rock, and in another place is suspended in the air—for the power of the Emperor has added another portion to the (original) hill. The stones of this substruction are not of the size which we are accustomed to see; for the builders of this work, having to contend with the nature of the ground, and being forced to raise a building equal in size to a mountain, scorned the ordinary practices of building and betook themselves to new and altogether unknown methods: they cut blocks of stone of enormous size out of the mountains which rise to vast heights in the neighbourhood of the city, cunningly squared them, and brought them thither in the following manner: they built wagons of the same size as these stones, and placed one stone upon each wagon. These wagons were dragged by picked oxen, chosen by the Emperor, 40 of them dragging each wagon with its stone. Since it was impossible for the roads leading into the city to take these wagons upon them, they made a passage for them by cutting deeply into the mountains, and thus formed the church of the great length which it was the Emperor's pleasure that it should have. After they had built it of a proportional width they were not able to put a roof upon it. While they were inspecting every grove and place which they heard was planted with tall trees, they discovered a thick

wood, producing cedars of enormous height, with which they made the roof of the church, of a height proportional to its length and width. These were the works which the Emperor Justinian constructed by human power and art, though assisted by his pious confidence, which in its turn reflected honour upon himself and helped him to carry out his design. This church required to be surrounded on every side with columns, such as in beauty would be worthy of the main building, and of a size capable of supporting the weight which would be laid upon them. However, the place, from its inland situation at a distance from the sea, and from its being entirely surrounded by the precipitous mountains which I have mentioned, rendered it impossible for the builders of the foundation to bring columns thither from elsewhere. While, however, the Emperor was grieving at this difficulty, God pointed out in the nearest mountains a bed of stone of a kind suitable for this purpose, which either had existed there in former times and been concealed, or was then created. Either story is credible to those who regard God as the cause of it ; for we, measuring everything by our human strength, think that many things belong to the region of the impossible, while for God nothing whatever is difficult or impossible. The church, thus, is supported by a great number of columns brought from this place, of very great size, and of a colour, which resembles flame, some below, and some round the porticos which encircle the whole church, except on the side turned towards the east. Of these columns, the two which stand before the door of the church are of very unusual size, and probably second to no columns in the whole world. Beyond them is another portico, named the Narthex (reed), I suppose because it is narrow ; after this is a court of square shape supported by columns of equal size ; from this lead doors of such grandeur as to show those passing them what a spectacle they are about to meet with. Beyond this is a wonderful porch, and an arch supported on two columns of great height. Proceeding further, there stand two semi-circles, opposite to one another, on each side of the way to the church ; while on either side of the road are two hospices—the work of the Emperor Justinian—one of which is destined for the reception of strangers, while the other is an infirmary for the sick poor. The Emperor Justinian also endowed this Church of the Virgin with large revenues. Such were the works of the Emperor Justinian in Jerusalem.”

In this interesting description of the Basilica of St. Mary it is evident that Procopius wrote as a courtier, and did not altogether adhere to the truth. Anyone reading it would suppose that the idea of building the church was Justinian's, that he selected the site, and proposed the construction of the hospices; whereas, in truth, as I shall show later, he only completed a church that was already commenced, and the idea of building the hospices was suggested by another. The statement that Jerusalem is surrounded by mountains of vast height, and that the Emperor selected all the transport oxen can hardly be regarded as rigidly accurate. These, however, are small matters, and, viewed as a whole, the account is probably fairly correct.

It will be observed that the building is spoken of as the "New Church." This may mean that it was an entirely new building on a hitherto vacant site, or that it was a new church to take the place of an old one on the same site. This, in ordinary language, would be the meaning, and it appears to me from the history to be the more probable acceptation of the expression.

In utilising the description in order to fix the site of the building, the following points seem specially worthy of attention:—

- (a) The church was built on the highest of the hills in Jerusalem.
- (b) It was within the city, and, as it was impossible to bring the materials by the ordinary streets, it was necessary to cut a special road to the site to facilitate transport.
- (c) There was a quarry in the hill near the site, and apparently conveniently situated for bringing the stone by the excavated road.
- (d) The greater part of the church was on the level, but it was necessary to build up under the south-eastern part to bring it to the level of the rest of the building.

Assuming that the church was built, as generally supposed, in the southern part of the Haram area, let us see how these conditions would apply. The greater part of the area within the walls of Jerusalem consists of two hills—the western, on which, in old days, stood the upper city, and now known as Sion; and the eastern, on which was the Temple of the Jews, and which sloped down towards the south to the Pool of Siloam. There is also a third hill to the north, but as this was the site of the Holy Sepulchre

and its surrounding buildings at the time of Justinian as it now is, it is outside the present question. The height of the western hill varies from about 2,520 feet at the south to 2,540 feet above sea level at the north, whereas the height of the western hill at the summit is 2,440 feet, and at the Mosque of Aksa 2,418 feet above the sea. Speaking generally, therefore, the western hill is 100 feet higher than the eastern, and why Procopius should have stated so positively that the Church of St. Mary was built on the higher hill if he meant that it was built on the lower is a little hard to understand.

Secondly, if the church had been built near the south wall of the Haram, it is impossible to think why it should have been necessary to make a rock-cut road to the site so as to avoid bringing the stones through the city, as the material would naturally have been conveyed by the Valley of Cedron and would not have come through the city.

Then, as regards (c), we know of no quarry near the south wall of the Haram, but I would not lay too much stress on this, as of course there might be a quarry which is now concealed by rubbish.

Lastly, as regards (d), if the church had been on the site of the present Mosque of Aksa, no great raising of the ground would have been necessary. But this would have been necessary if the church had been at the south-east corner of the Haram enclosure, as suggested by Mr. Fergusson. For his arguments upon the subject I would refer the reader to his work, *The Temples of the Jews*.

If, on the other hand, it is assumed that the Basilica of St. Mary was on the southern part of Mount Sion on the site of the existing buildings known as the Cenaculum or Tomb of David, the conditions already enumerated apply much better. In the first place, the church would have been on the higher hill, as stated by Procopius. Secondly, it would be within the city, and there is a rock-cut road from the outside of the city leading towards its south-eastern end. Full details of this road are given in Dr. Bliss's *Excavations at Jerusalem*, and its position and sections are illustrated by drawings.¹ The object of making this rock cutting has not hitherto been explained, but if it is the road spoken of by Procopius, the reason becomes quite clear. Thirdly, as regards (c), there is a quarry in the hill close to the outer end of the road

¹ *Excavations at Jerusalem*, p. 8.

which was thoroughly examined by Dr. Bliss, and is described in the *Excavations at Jerusalem*.¹

Lastly, as regards (*d*), as the ground to the east of the Cœnaculum has not been explored, it is impossible to speak definitely, but there is no reason why the foundation should not have been laid as described by Procopius.

After carefully considering the argument on both sides as based on Procopius's account of the church, I think it is more probable that it was situated on Mount Sion than in the Haram.

I will now proceed to discuss the question as to the information on the subject to be derived from other authors. The earliest account of a visit to Jerusalem is that of the Bordeaux Pilgrim, who went to Palestine in the year 333 A.D. At that time the buildings at and near the Holy Sepulchre, which were constructed by Constantine, were just completed, and are shortly described by the Pilgrim. He also speaks of the site of the Temple of Solomon, but makes no mention of any church or Christian site in its vicinity. As regards Sion, he writes as follows²:—

“On this side one goes up Sion and sees where the house of Caiaphas the priest was, and there still stands a column against which Christ was beaten with rods.” The Pilgrim does not state whether there was or was not a church on Sion at that time.

Fifty years later, about A.D. 385, St. Sylvia made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and wrote a very full account of what she saw. Unfortunately, the earlier part of the work, in which she probably gave an account of Jerusalem, is lost; but we have her description of the religious services performed during the year, which gives much useful information. She mentions the Basilica of the Anastasis, or Holy Sepulchre; the great Basilica of Constantine, known as the Martyrium; and also frequently refers to a church on Sion. For example, she says³:—“On the Lord's Day—*i.e.*, Easter Day—after vespers at the Anastasis, all the people escort the bishop with hymns to Sion. When they have come there, hymns suitable to the day and place are sung, prayer is offered, and that place is read from the Gospel where on the same day the Lord entered in to the disciples when the doors were shut, in the same place where the church now is in Sion.” Again she says, speaking

¹ *Excavations at Jerusalem*, p. 12.

² *Palestine Pilgrims' Texts*, vol. i. “Bordeaux Pilgrim,” p. 23.

³ *Ibid.*, vol. i. “St. Sylvia,” p. 67.

of Pentecost¹:—"As soon as the mass is over in the Martyrium, all the people together escort the bishop to Sion with hymns, and they get to Sion when it is now the third hour. And when they have come there, that place from the Acts of the Apostles is read, where the Spirit descends so that all nations might understand the things that were spoken, and after that mass is celebrated in due order. For the priests read the passage from the Acts of the Apostles because the place is in Sion (there is another church there now) where once after the Lord's Passion a multitude was collected with the Apostles, when this happened of which we spoke above." It is evident, therefore, that in the time of St. Sylvia there was a church on Sion, and that it was regarded as a holy place. On the other hand, though she frequently speaks of processions passing between the Holy Sepulchre and the Mount of Olives, the route of which lay close to the site of the Temple, she never alludes to any church or holy place in the vicinity of the latter.

The account given by St. Sylvia is confirmed by the Holy Paula, who visited Jerusalem about the same time. She also makes no allusion to any church or holy place near the site of the Temple, but says that there was a church at Sion, of which she speaks as follows²:—

"Leaving that place (*i.e.*, the Holy Sepulchre), she ascended Sion, which signifies 'citadel' or 'watch-tower.' . . . There was shown a column supporting the portico of a church, stained with the blood of the Lord, to which He is said to have been bound and scourged. The place was shown where the Holy Spirit descended upon the souls of over 120 believers, that the prophecy of Joel might be fulfilled."

It will be observed that neither Sylvia nor Paula gives a name to the church, but both speak of it simply as the church at Sion.

The next document we have to examine is the letter of Bishop Eucherius to the priest Faustinus, giving a short account of Jerusalem and the neighbourhood. The date is uncertain, but it is believed to have been written about the middle of the fifth century. Eucherius describes Sion first, the holy places round the Holy Sepulchre second, and then the Temple area.

¹ *Palestine Pilgrims' Texts*, vol. i. "St. Sylvia," p. 69.

² *Ibid.*, vol. i. "Holy Paula," p. 6.

Of Sion he says¹:—"Mount Sion on one side, that which faces north is set apart for the dwelling of priests and monks; the level ground on its summit is covered by the cells of monks surrounding a church, which, it is said, was built there by the apostles out of reverence for the place of our Lord's resurrection; because, as promised before by the Lord, they were filled with the Holy Ghost." Of the Temple he writes:—"The Temple, which was situated in the lower part of the city near the city wall on the east side, and was splendidly built, was once a world's wonder, but out of its ruins there stands only the pinnacle of one wall, the rest being destroyed to their very foundations." There is not a word here of a church or place revered by Christians near the Temple.

Some time early in the sixth century and prior to Justinian, Theodosius wrote his short tract on the Holy Land. After speaking of the Sepulchre and Golgotha he goes on to say²:—"From Golgotha it is 200 paces to Holy Sion, the mother of all churches; which Sion our Lord Christ founded with his apostles. It was the house of St. Mark the Evangelist. From holy Sion to the house of Caiaphas, now the Church of St. Peter, it is 50 paces more or less. From the house of Caiaphas to the Hall of Pilate it is 100 paces more or less. There is the Church of St. Sophia. Hard by holy Jeremiah was cast into the pit. The pillar formerly in the house of Caiaphas, at which the Lord was scourged, is now in holy Sion. This pillar at the bidding of the Lord followed Him; and, as He clung to it, while He was being scourged, His arms, hands, and fingers sank into it, as if it were wax, and the marks appear to this day." It would appear, therefore, that from the time of the Bordeaux Pilgrim early in the fourth century up to the time of Justinian a group of churches and holy places had been growing up on Mount Sion, and that whereas the Pilgrim only mentions the house of Caiaphas and the pillar of the scourging as being there, there were at the beginning of the sixth century three churches, *i.e.*, the Mother Church of Sion, the Church of St. Peter, and the Church of St. Sophia. Up to the time of Justinian there appears to be no satisfactory evidence of the existence of any church within the Temple area.

(To be continued.)

¹ *Palestine Pilgrims' Texts*, vol. ii. "St. Eucherius," p. 8.

² *Ibid.*, vol. ii. "Theodosius," p. 10.