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THE HOLY CITY OF JERUSALEM: A CYCLE OF POEMS

by St. Sophronius, Patriarch of Jerusalem (634-638)

*There, at present, by the command
of the Emperor Constantine, has been
built a basilica, that is to say, a church
of wondrous beauty.*

THE PILGRIM OF BORDEAUX, 333 A.D.

The following poems are a cry of longing for the holy city of Jerusalem, written sometime after the young Sophronius' exile from the Holy Land in 603, in the face of the advancing Persian invasion. The beautiful Church of the Holy Resurrection, built by Sts. Constantine and Helen in 325, that Sophronius saw in the early 7th century, was burned to the ground by invading Persians thirty years before Sophronius became Patriarch of Jerusalem. After his consecration to the patriarchal throne in 634, he would have served in the newly rebuilt Church of the Holy Resurrection, another compelling reason to surrender the city to the Muslims in 638 to avoid a second destruction of the holy places. Although the beauty and rhythm of the Greek cannot be rendered in English, the following excerpts from *The Anacreonticon* give a hint of the yearning that echoes today in the hearts of exiled Palestinians and Christians everywhere.

Jerusalem

Holy City of God,
Jerusalem, how I long to stand
even now at your gates,
and go in, rejoicing!

A divine longing for holy Solyma*
presses upon me insistently.

*Solyma: Jerusalem

Mount Sion

And, speeding on,
may I pass to Sion

where, in the likeness of fiery tongues,
the Grace of God descended;

where, when He had completed
the mystic supper, the King of All
teaching in humility
washed His disciples' feet.

Blessings of salvation, like rivers
pour from that Rock where Mary
handmaid of God, childbearing for all men,
was laid out in death.

Hail, Sion, radiant Sun of the universe!
Night and day I long and yearn for thee.

There, after shattering hell,
and liberating the dead,
the King of All, the Shatterer
appeared there, the Friend.

Holy Wisdom (The Praetorium)

Then let me leave Sion's summit
and, embracing the stone
where for me my Creator was smitten
go down to the House and the Stone;
And let me fall to the ground and venerate -
I am oppressed by tears! The spot
where the foremost of those who love Wisdom
heard His own sentence.

The Constantinian Basilica

And let me go rejoicing
to the splendid sanctuary, the place
where the noble Empress Helena
found the divine Wood;

and go up,
my heart overcome with awe,
and see the Upper Room,
the Reed, the Sponge, and the Lance.

Then may I gaze down
upon the fresh beauty of the Basilica
where choirs of monks
sing nightly songs of worship.

The Portico and the Rock of the Cross

Let me pass on to the portico,
all covered with pearls and gold,
and go on into the lovely building
of the Place of the Skull.

Ocean of life ever living
and of the true oblivion.
Tomb that gives light!

And prostrate I will venerate
the navel-point of the earth, that divine Rock
in which was fixed the wood
which undid the curse of the tree.

How great thy glory,
noble Rock, in which was fixed
the Cross, the Redemption of mankind!

Exultant let me go on to the place
where all of us
who belong to the people of God
venerate the glorious Wood of the Cross.

Let me run to bend the knee
before the artist's picture
representing the Rulers,
to render homage.

The Anastasis (Church of the Resurrection)

Let me walk thy pavements
and go inside the Anastasis,
where the King of All rose again,
trampling down the power of death.

Through the divine sanctuary
I will penetrate the divine Tomb,
and with deep reverence
will I venerate the Rock.

And as I venerate that worthy Tomb,
surrounded by its conches
and columns, surmounted by golden lilies,
I shall be overcome with joy.

The Mount of Olives

How surpassing sweet thou art,
lofty Mountain, from which
Christ the Lord looked into heaven!

And from that famous valley
I will mount those steps,
and venerate the Mount of Olives
from which He ascended into heaven.

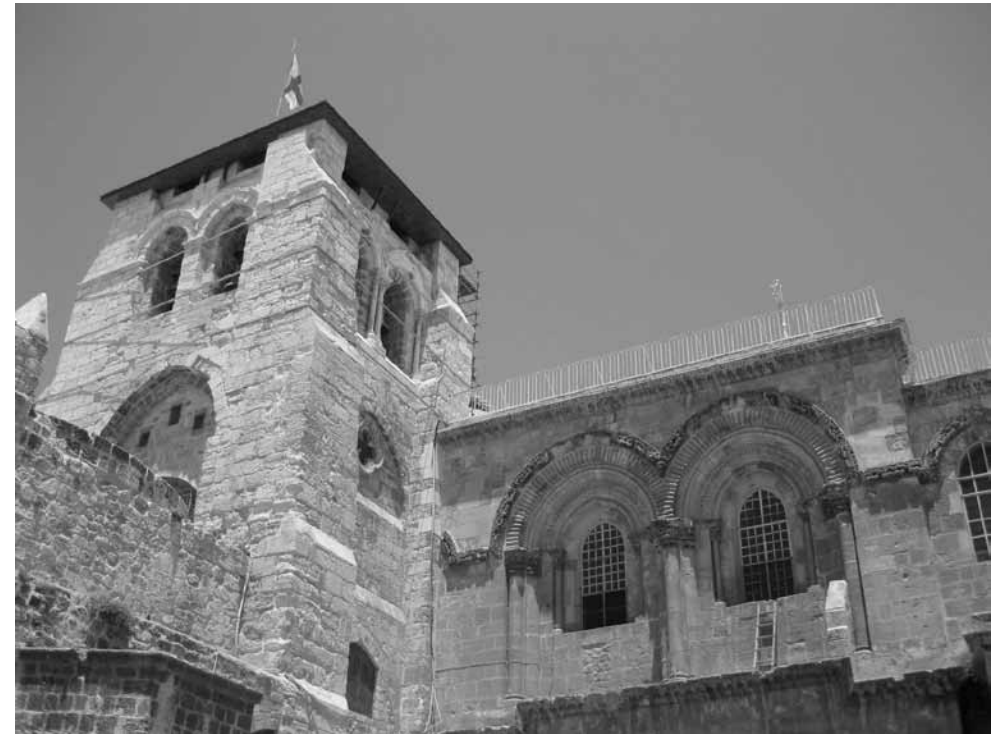
Highly will I praise
the endless depth of the divine Wisdom,
by which He saved me,
swiftly will I pass thence to the place,

Where, to His venerable companions,
He taught the divine mysteries
shedding light into secret depths,
there, under that roof, may I be!

Then let me go out
through the Great Door onto the steps,
and regard the beauty of the Holy City
lying over to the west.

How sweet it is to see thy fair beauty,
City of God, from the Mount of Olives! ✚

Original translation by J. Wilkinson (*Jerusalem Pilgrims before the Crusades*, 1977) Editing by Monachos.net (2006) and *Road to Emmaus* (2010).



The Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem.