

The Open Court

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Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the
Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

Founded by EDWARD C. HEGELEK

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TOMB OF ABSALOM (in the Valley of Jehoshaphat, near Jerusalem)

Frontispiece to The Open Court.

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PALESTINE: THE LAND OF MANY SACRED SITES

AMOS I. DUSHAW

TO appreciate the full significance of the words—The Holy Land—it is absolutely necessary to spend some time there; visit her cities, villages, valleys, plains, and rivers, on and off the beaten path. I know an American who spent a day and a half in the Holy City, motored to the lake of Galilee and returned in time to take the train for Jaffa where the tourists' boat was waiting for her scattered and sight-seeing flock. This gentleman is now speaking on the problems of Palestine and the Near East. Go where you will, and you are never far away from some spot that some people consider sacred. To the shallow observer this may appear to be nothing more than simply bits of superstition from which primitive folk cannot easily free themselves. But to the student this means more, and instead of scoffing at their credulity he soon learns to appreciate their spirit of reverence. For example: in the wilderness, far from permanent settlements, save for some poor families dwelling in caves, real troglodytes, and a few Bedouin encampments, I saw such a spot. It was the grave of a Sheikh, and on the top of it were primitive tools and a few simple farm implements. The owners placed them there for safety, knowing that no one would touch them while they were there. Many of these sacred places are very ancient, and some more modern. A rumor that the spirit of a dead neighbor had appeared at a certain place makes that spot sacred, and some monument is erected to his memory. The departed ones who are honored in this way were not always of saintly character. For example: a building was erected over a grave in a certain village to the memory of one who carried water in an ordinary wicker-basket because there were no pails or jars at that particular time. This was considered a miracle. Within these mausoleums the villagers put various articles

for safety, knowing that no one will steal them. Fruit trees adjoining such places are sacred, and no one will take the fruit. However, such places are not always tombs. At Ramallah, a Christian village, about ten miles from Jerusalem, the Christians use an old mosque, while at Samaria, the Moslems use an old Christian church. At Samaria the Moslems show a grave they believe to be that of John the Baptist. To the student of the Bible these sacred places are a reminder of the High Places in ancient Palestine. What were they?

A cursory reading of the lives of the kings of Judah brings to our attention the oft-repeated words, "Howbeit the high places were not taken away; the people still sacrificed and burnt incense in the high places." Hezekiah was the first king to make the attempt to remove them, but his son Manasseh soon restored them. It was Josiah, the grandson of Manasseh, who finally put an end to them. "He put down the idolatrous priests, whom the kings of Judah had ordained to burn incense in the high places." Until the time of Josiah, sacrificing and the burning of incense was carried on in these high places, and later also at Jerusalem. Jerusalem simply became the most prominent of them. In I. Kings iii. 3, 4, we read that before the Temple was built Solomon "went to Gibson to sacrifice there; for that was the great high place." At this place God appeared to Solomon in a dream by night.

Josiah's destruction of the high places was most thorough. He also destroyed the chapels built by Solomon for his wives. In some instances Josiah killed the priests who officiated at these places. He destroyed every high place from Geba on the North to Beer-Sheba in the South, including the famous and time-honored place at Bethel and those throughout Samaria. This Reformation was no doubt the most iconoclastic on record. He carried out the command as given Deuteronomy xii. 2, 3, to the very letter. "Ye shall surely destroy all the places wherein the nations that ye shall dispossess served their gods, upon the high mountains, and upon the high hills, and under every green tree." In the attempt to centralize worship at Jerusalem many places associated with the sacred memories of their ancestors were also destroyed.

But this drastic effort to purify religion and save the state was not successful, and it was not long afterwards that both Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed, and religion was saved in spite of it. The high places were the village churches, and around each shrine centered the religious and social life of the community. After the destruction of these shrines life in the villages must have been

quite dull, especially as we know that a sacrifice was in most instances a family feast. From the time of Josiah until the destruction of the second Temple under Titus we have no record that the Jews of Palestine ever sacrificed outside of Jerusalem. But after the Exile the synagogues took the place of the high places. Instead of sacrificing and the burning of incense the synagogues served a nobler purpose. Here the Rabbi and Teacher, not the Priest, officiated. We will now consider very briefly the high places in modern Palestine.

It will no doubt come as a surprise to many to call the sacred places the High Places of modern Palestine. A writer on Palestine who made a special study of this subject said, "It may be said of every site of Old Testament times, that is known or supposed to be known, and of many later sites, including crusading remains, that the superstitious reverence of the peasantry clings to them. Add to these the shrines of the dervishes and the insane, which are often revered as devoutly by Christians as by Moslems, and one begins to recognize the existence of powerful religious influences quite independent of the teachings of Christianity or Islam." He might have added, "and also of Judaism." It is true that at these places the devout do not sacrifice or burn incense, but they do burn oil. Almost every native village has its shrine, called a *Weli*. It is generally a domed building over the grave of a sheikh. The spirit of the place is interceded with, and vows are made in case of answered prayer. And the natives tell the most wonderful stories of answered prayers. They also tell of the spirit persecuting those whose prayers were answered and who failed to carry out their vows. They also have their sacred trees, and to the branches of these trees they tie rags to remind the spirits that they made their requests and vows.

The following illustration will give some idea what the natives think of some of their shrines. My American friend who was making a special study of the *Welis*—before entering one of them was carefully warned by the friendly natives not to do so—because they feared that the spirit might resent the intrusion of a foreigner and kill him. He entered, but before doing so was requested to take off his shoes as a mark of reverence. He took a picture of the interior while the natives looked on in breathless silence, and were greatly astonished when he came out unharmed.

The Jews have their sacred shrines also. Rachel's tomb, about a mile from Bethlehem, is one of these. This is the only spot of Old Testament interest to which the Jews have exclusive rights, and the chief rabbi of Jerusalem has the key to it. They assemble here from

time to time for prayer. They do the same at Hebron where the patriarchs are buried, but they do not have ready access to the graves of their forefathers. The Moslems refuse them this privilege, and before the war Christians were also refused this privilege. And wherever a rabbi of note is buried the Jews resort to his tomb for prayer. A short distance from the American colony at Jerusalem is the tomb of Simon the Just. The caretaker has oil lamps burning



Tomb of St. Saba at Mar Sabba

on the saint's grave, and I have seen Jews rush in, offer a prayer for themselves and friends far away, and then contribute towards the upkeep of the light. The caretaker charges about twenty-five cents per prayer. He prayed for my American friend and I, but before doing so insisted that we pay the fifty cents in advance. He then asked us if we had any family, but refused to pray for them unless

we paid twenty-five cents for each person. At Tiberias on the lake of Galilee they have several such places where famous rabbis are buried, Akiva, scholar and saint, who espoused the cause of Bar Cochba, the false messiah; Johanan Ben Sakai, and Maimonides, talmudist, philosopher, and physician. At the graves of Johanan Ben Sakai and Maimonides, a Spanish-Jewish rabbi who was our guide prayed for my friend and I. At the conclusions of his prayers we gave him what we thought was a generous fee, but he asked for more. And when we told him that we were Christian ministers, he said, "Never mind, Jesus was a Jew." In each of these graves there is a niche where the devout and superstitious place their oil



Tomb of Simon the Just

lamps when they come for special prayer. Jesus must have had such places in mind when He said, "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye build the sepulchres of the prophets, and garnish the tombs of the righteous, and say, If we had been in the days of our fathers, we should not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets." About a quarter of a mile from the Lake, on the side of a hill facing the East is the lonely grave of the great Rabbi Akiva. The fact that he was led astray by Bar Cochba does not lessen his worth in the estimation of his people. But Jesus, the greatest of all Jews, the noblest benefactor of the ages, past and present, is still despised and rejected by His own. What strange

inconsistency! And yet Jews will boast that they are strict monotheists and do not believe in mediators!

Thus in spite of all that has transpired during the past millenniums: the destruction of the high places by Josiah, the rise of post-exilic Judaism, Christianity and Mohammedanism, today in Palestine, on the hill-tops, or hill-sides, or in some secluded spot in a valley away from the main roads, and also on main roads may be seen the modern high places and sacred trees which Deuteronomy condemned to which Jews, Christians, and Moslems go in time of need to pour out to the spirit of the place their hearts' desires. They are doing what Hannah, the mother of Samuel, did when she went to the high place at Shiloh where she prayed for a son, and made



Grave of Johanan ben Zakai

a vow to the Lord. However, a victory for decency in religion has been won. At these modern high places, Jewish, Christian, and Moslem, a spirit of reverence is maintained, and the places are clean, physically and morally.

The sacred sites and the new order. At this time we should be on our guard against all the wild reports which appear from time to time in the Secular and Religious press. It is not so long ago that an article appeared in the *New York Times*, written by an American tourist, that the Jews were in danger of being wiped off the face of the earth by an aroused Christian world—up-to-date crusades—because of a rumor that the Jews were planning to damage the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. If there is any danger of this sacred edifice

being damaged, it will be, not at the hands of Jews or Moslems, but at the hands of quarreling Christian sects, Romans, Greeks, and Armenians. During the Turkish occupation, when no Jew was permitted to enter this Church, Turkish troops were generally on guard to protect Christians from hurting each other. The same was true of the Church of the Nativity at Bethlehem. Another report has been circulated from time to time, in England and America, that Jews were planning to purchase the Temple area for the purpose of building a Third Temple. This place is owned and controlled by Moslems, and quite naturally they did not relish this rumor. At any rate, purchasing it sounded better than taking it by force. British tourists have asked me as to the truth of this report. These wild



Grave of Maimonides at Tiberias

reports, the offspring of fancy, or mischief-making minds, are damaging to the best interests of Palestine. Whatever injures one race or sect injures all. Idle rumors and wild talk, with no basis of fact, is the cause of much injury to all the races and sects of Palestine.

The latest report from Palestine is the establishment of the "Palestine Bank of Commerce and Industry." This is strictly a Palestine institution, and its board of directors are Moslems, Christians, and Jews, and its aim is to aid all worthy native enterprises. Such institutions generally make for peace, and under British protection, sooner or later, mutual confidence will be restored, and we shall hear less and less of strife, and more and more of Peace and Progress.