

A Selection of First Hand Accounts of 19th Century Jerusalem

By Shelomo Alfassa from his book: '*A Window Into Old Jerusalem*' (December 2007)

Prepared for Yeshiva University Museum for use during the photo exhibition:

'Picturing Jerusalem' (December 4, 2007-April 27, 2008)

1845 (Extreme Poverty) “Returning from the Temple, our way led through the Jews’ Quarter. No description could give an adequate idea of its squalid filth and wretchedness. The houses are built of stone, but many of them are dilapidated, and repairs seem never to be made. Although the position of the quarter, upon the slope of Zion, affords better opportunities for draining and cleansing than any other part of the city, its streets are almost impassable from the collections of filth—the refuse of slaughter-houses, arid abominations of all sorts—which block up the way, and fill the atmosphere with noisome odours. The Jewish population is confined to this quarter, and numbers, perhaps, about five thousand. They are supported by the contributions of their brethren in Europe for the purpose of keeping up their ancient worship in the Holy City. Their fidelity is to be praised, though their condition is to be pitied.”

1852 (Natural Beauty) “We left Jerusalem by the Jaffa Gate, because within a few months neither travellers nor baggage are allowed to pass the Damascus Gate, on account of smuggling operations having been carried on there. Not far from the city wall there is a superb terebinth tree, now in the full glory of its shining green leaves. It appears to be bathed in a perpetual dew; the rounded masses of foliage sparkle and glitter in the light, and the great spreading boughs flood the turf below with a deluge of delicious shade. A number of persons were reclining on the grass under it, and one of them, a very handsome Christian boy, spoke to us in Italian and English. I scarcely remember a brighter and purer day than that of our departure. The sky was a sheet of spotless blue; every rift and scar of the distant hills was retouched with a firmer pencil, and all the outlines, blurred away by the haze of the previous few days, were restored with wonderful distinctness. The temperature was hot, but not sultry, the air we breathed was an elixir of immortality.”

1853 (Suffering) “The rain had fallen in January and again at the beginning of February. At various times during this season we have not only snow, but rain in torrents; there is then no more fear of water being scarce for those who have cisterns. The water-supply of Jerusalem is not from springs, but each house has its own cistern, into which the rain is collected as it falls upon the flat roofs and terraces. But in the Jewish quarter it is always scarce, first, because of the crowded state of the houses, in each of which several families live; secondly, because the Moslem landlords have allowed the cisterns to fall into disrepair, so that the greater number of them hold little or no water. Hence the poor Jews have always to buy water, which they obtain from the peasantry, who bring it into the city in skins on their asses, from the springs at Siloam, Lifta, and elsewhere. When the rain has been abundant, the Jews have to pay less-but when the rains are delayed, exorbitant prices are charged, and the misery and suffering endured by men, women, and children in the Jewish quarter, for want of water to drink, are grievous to witness. The state of poverty among the Jews at this time exceeded anything we had before known.”

1853 (Language) “With regard to pure Hebrew, the learned world in Europe is greatly mistaken in designating this a dead language. In Jerusalem it is a living tongue of everyday utility—necessarily so, for in what else could Jewish strangers from the opposite ends of the earth converse together? In our

Consular office, Hebrew was often heard spoken. On one occasion, a Jew from Cabool [Iraq], had to enter into explanations with one from California, this was in Hebrew of course.”

1857 (Education) “About fourteen houses, dignified by the name of “Synagogues,” are used for the purpose of worship, though only three or four are worthy of this appellation; and for special indoctrination in Talmudic philosophy, they have various other more retired places of study. The very partial literary instruction received by the children is imparted in the most disorderly and imperfect manner, either in private families or a public school—there being only one such for all the fraternity of Israel.”

1860 (Observations) “The Jews constitute, in every point of view, the most interesting portion of the population of the Holy City. I have already referred to the peculiar wretchedness of the quarter which they occupy upon the eastern part of Zion. The streets are the narrowest as well as the foulest, beyond all comparison, in Jerusalem. The houses are not only small, but in a more dilapidated condition than those occupied by Turks or Christians. I know not whether the police devolves on the Mussulman authorities or upon the occupants of this particular region. If to the former, the manifest neglect and abounding filth afford proof of their utter disregard and even contempt for this persecuted race. If it is by their own fault that the Jews dwell in the midst of such abominations, it must be taken as the highest evidence of the depth of their degradation, and they well deserve the retribution which is visited upon them in the forms of annual pestilence, and of the general abhorrence of their fellow-men.”

1866 (A Visit to the Synagogue) “There were also here and there old men absorbed in their studies—some with huge spectacles. One young man, very pale and exhausted-looking, had a handkerchief tightly bound round his head. Walter asked the reason. ‘It was to quiet the pain in his forehead, caused by constant reading. He had undertaken to perform instead of another, the meritorious action of reading through the Bible in ten days and nights, and had got rather more than half-way through. For this he was paid a trifling sum by the person whose soul was to be benefited by the merit of this action.’”

1868 (The Old City) “The walls of Jerusalem are still perfect, dating only from 1523. It is said that fifty feet of the outer wall in parts are buried in soil and rubbish. The refuse and sweepings of Jerusalem have for ages been heaping up the valleys around here, but have not yet made any considerable impression upon them. There are five gates now open—the Gate of Damascus, the Gate of St. Stephen, the Dung Gate, the Gate of Zion, and the Jaffa Gate. Herod’s Gate has been closed for twenty years, and the Golden Gate, the finest of all, and the one by which the temple was approached from Olivet, was built up solidly generations back. Within the city, Jerusalem is still marked by its original divisions into four quarters: First, Mount Zion, or the quarter of the Franks, the highest part of the city, at the northwest, which contains the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the principal convents, the chief consulates, the English chapel, with the bishop’s house; second, the Armenian quarter, at the south-west, over which rises, on one of the two swells of Mount Zion, the immense Armenian convent, which accommodates a large number of the pilgrims of that ecclesiastical body; third, the Moslem quarter, on Mount Moriah, where are found the Mosques of Omar and El Aksa, and the residence of the governor; fourth, the Jewish quarter, on the south-east, on one of the slopes of Mount Zion, and in the old valley, now nearly filled up, of the cheese-makers (Tyropean). In the narrow and dark streets of this section dwell, in their mud houses, hundreds of poor and wretched Jewish families, steeped in filth and the terrible odors of the sewers that empty in their neighborhood. The general appearance of modern Jerusalem is fetid, squalid, and mean in the extreme. It is crowded, wherever built upon at all. Yet there are great vacant spaces, even within the present narrow walls, which are as much a wilderness as if a hundred miles from habitations.”