Essay and Review Article

GRAHAM MURPHY

Matthew Teller, ***Nine Quarters of Jerusalem, A new Biography of the Old City*****,** Profile Books, 2022, pp 390. ISBN 9781788169189, £16.99 hbk, £10.99 pbk.

At the founding of modern Israel, the Jewish Quarter in that part of Jerusalem known as the Old City was overwhelmed by the Jordanian army, all but one of its thirty-five synagogues were destroyed or re-purposed. Occupants of that district were forced to leave. Their expulsion was in contrast to the victory of Zionist forces elsewhere in Palestine. These initiated a depopulation of some 500 Arab villages, which has since been called the *nakba* (catastrophe). By May 1948 around 200,000 Palestinians were refugees, seeking safety in nearby Arab countries, having lost homes and land to make way for a Jewish state. This refugee figure was later to rise to 720,000, 80% of Arab Palestinians, uprooted with no right of return, from what had become the new Israel. Nearly two decades later, 1967, in a six-day war with Arab states bordering on Israel, East Jerusalem was captured and the Jewish Quarter was then reclaimed. For a majority of non-Jewish Jerusalemites living in the Old City, the ’67 war has meant that they and their descendants are effectively stateless.

Matthew Teller is a BBC foreign correspondent and travel writer. In his book about the Old City he describes a place we can visualise, though we may never have been there. We see in our minds eye a golden Dome set within castellated walls as if true to the plans in history books and illustrated bibles. How we imagine Jerusalem is freighted with biblical notions which Teller’s book tends to undermine with doses of reality. He draws our attention to lesser-known aspects of the city’s past and finds himself fascinated by the religious rituals. He interviews the people who live and work beside the pilgrim routes and sacred sites. He shows us how they regard their city, how they cope with its recurrent crises and the lack of rights for the majority who live there.

Priests, rabbis, imams, and politicians Teller avoids. He seeks conversations with a drinks-vendor, a caretaker, a gallery owner, a textile merchant, a voluntary worker; occupants of unreported properties such as the community centre, a stall in a souk, a museum, a hole in a wall. He sets their opinions beside chunks of history and a sceptical commentary about strange behaviours in the holy places. His book is chatty, undogmatic, and well-informed. It

is not just a history, nor is it a pageant of the Abrahamic faiths – as in Karen Armstrong's *Jerusalem* (1997) – nor is it a tourist's guide, and its title is deliberately enigmatic.

Forget the nine. Teller has admitted this is a number plucked from the air. The sum of the quarters might as well be thirty-nine but certainly not the four that is generally accepted. Jerusalem was Roman in the time of Jesus; in recognition of this, 19th century map-makers stressed the two straight streets that intersect at the centre of the city. Their emphasis restricts in appearance the main ethnicities to an idealised four-zoned plan: Jewish, Christian, Armenian, Muslim. This crude reduction was meant to be of use for Protestant missionaries who were not wishing to waste their time in trying to convert Muslims – a notoriously difficult task – when Jews were seen as an easier target. For getting to know a population of 36,000 of which 90% is non-Jewish, generally poor and mostly Muslim, the maps are a disaster. Their ethnic labelling has an impious intent. In the words of Teller, if this 'framing and fostering of sectarian division … hadn't suited the British [particularly during the period of Mandate, 1920-48] such cartographic fantasy would never have persisted. The fact that it has, to the extent that it is all over the internet and available for free at every tourist office speaks volumes about the colonial ambitions of waves of Jerusalem's rulers, down to our own time.' The maps look as though they are communicating things that are true - ghettos from a time immemorial. They are anything but. The musician and diarist Wasif Jawhariyyah (1897-1972) wrote vividly 'about the shared experience of religious celebrations and the fluidity of intercommunal relations.' This was just before the Mandate when maps were still of little importance. For Palestinians within the walls of Jerusalem, the sense of having had a tolerant and unified city is derived from a past only recently lost from living memory.

Even a poor map will usually be accurate in the location of impressive defence works. So it is with Jerusalem, and the walls look to be in remarkable condition. They are not the originals, these were pulled down to prevent crusaders holing up in the city. For three hundred years the fortress ceased to be as such, dilapidated until Sultan Suleiman (1494-1566) decreed its rebuilding. Twelve metres high, two metres thick, his walls have entrances at Damascus Gate, Flowers Gate, Lions Gate, Golden Gate (blocked up until the Messiah arrives), Dung Gate, Zion Gate, Jaffa Gate, and New Gate (19th century).

Residents never cared much for Suleiman's fine monument. They built shops and cafes, inside, outside, leaning on the walls and around the gates; the Mandate also put a stop to this. Doyen of English Arts and Crafts, Charles Ashbee, had no doubt about how to display

‘ancient’ walls. As Civic Advisor in 1918 he saw not only to a needed repair of the Dome of the Rock, he swept away the businesses flourishing in front of Suleiman’s icon and which we can now only see in old photographs. He did this to establish a foreground of green lawns. Ashbee’s lawns have since been designated a National Park, a stage for history sound and light shows with the floodlit walls as a dramatic backdrop. Interviewed by the *Times of Israel* (9th July 2022) Teller opined that ‘British colonialism irreparably damaged Jerusalem socially, politically, architecturally – in fact in every way.’ Nevertheless, he has ingeniously constructed the contents of half of his book in connection with the city’s gates, denuded or not, and next to these chapters he has layered his essays on other topics: placement and displacement, pilgrimage, Sufism, slavery and freedom, remarkable women, the Jewish Quarter, liberation, the Christian Quarter Road. This device is highly successful; jigsaw-like, a coherent picture gradually emerges from the many pieces.

A wall not of stone but of sections of concrete separates Palestinians from Israelis in the new Jerusalem as elsewhere on the West Bank. But in the Old City, the Al-Aqsa Compound is a huge space under open sky, mercifully free from ethnic partitions. The whole site is a mosque under Jordanian authority and with several entrances, one of which – with an Israeli checkpoint on the outside – is the means of access for non-Muslims. As Teller remarks, tourists are trafficked alongside Israeli settlers and their security guards, most of whom given half a chance would seize Al-Aqsa and change it entirely.

Within the compound is the unmistakeable golden Dome, on a drum supported with piers and columns. It is surrounded by an octagonal arcade, outside of which is a second octagon of tiled walls. Thus are created two walkways around a room which displays an expanse of rock. The architecture is predominantly Muslim with Christian influences. Teller sees it as a riposte to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre - 500 metres to the west – and to Christian theology; beautifully inscribed on the inside of the Dome are Quranic verses specifically denying Jesus’ divinity. According to tradition, this is the rock where Muhammad, after his Night Journey, ascended to heaven to speak with the prophets. For Jews it was once the holy of holies and where Abraham prepared his son as a sacrifice. At this very centre of Jerusalem, of the world even, Teller admits that he is struck not with awe so much as a sense of absence: ‘Once we have done enough to gain access, once every barrier has dissolved and every gate fallen open … penetrating to the very heart of mystery brings us to ourselves in empty space.’

For dwellers in the nearby African Quarter, Al-Aqsa is their spiritual home. Many have served time in Israeli jails for defending the Compound and its prayer hall. Along with the Ethiopian Christians they are admired by Palestinians generally as exemplars of *sumud,* steadfastness in the face of Israel's never-ending claims on the West Bank. (Looking across at the Mount of Olives is to view just one site of gradual encroachment. Since the publication of Teller's book, the Latin Patriarch, Pierbattista Pizzaballa, speaking for both the Vatican and the Orthodox churches, has warned of an increasing sense 'that we are guests in Jerusalem, rather than having rights and status as a community … It must be understood that we are not guests.' (*Guardian,* 4th April 2023)).

Teller lives and walks in North Oxfordshire normally, when not on his travels. Never a pilgrim, in Jerusalem his demeanour is that of a flaneur. As he wanders past ancient libraries he is drawn, serendipitously, into the home of a matriarch of one of the city's grand families. Her rooftop forms part of a broadwalk overlooking Al-Aqsa and in the rooms below are her adorable cats. This house was once a Sufi lodge. Having written a chapter on the Sufis one suspects Teller could have included a treatise on Jerusalem moggies. But that would be frivolous. '' This one thinks he's a lion,' she says, as a ginger ball of fluff miaows like a toad and stretches full-length before me on a vast well stuffed sofa … others sashay across the decorative floor tiles, rubbing themselves against curlicued table legs of dark, solid wood … Muhammad is said to have cut the sleeve off his robe one morning, rather than turf his sleeping cat, Muizza off. He said 'Love of cats is an aspect of faith.''

Teller's six-page summary (pp 109 -14) of the probable location of the sepulchre, the tomb of Jesus, is a tour de force of the scholarly debates. The wealthiest and most powerful of the Christian denominations, Orthodox and Roman Catholic, combine to run the crusader Church of the Holy Sepulchre. It is a revelation to read how this building functions on status quo, rules drawn up in 1757. Nothing may be altered without the approval of every one of the clerical players. There is seldom change. One family keeps the keys whilst only another has permission to turn them to open the doors. A wooden ladder abandoned on a ledge 266 years ago cannot be removed, the reason it was left there is still in dispute. No-one in the church may light a candle without the agreement of everyone else. Which makes the appearance of Holy Fire a double miracle.

At Easter, a huge congregation packs the church. In an atmosphere of considerable excitement the Greek Patriarch disappears, down into the empty tomb and prays for the

descent of Holy Fire. In approximately a minute he emerges carrying a flame even as a roar goes up, bells peal, ‘lamps in the church ignite spontaneously’ and Holy Fire is passed on bunches of candles to the Armenian and Coptic patriarchs, and from thence to the worshippers and crowds in the streets. Holy Fire is rushed to Bethlehem, Ramallah and Gaza ‘where it is received with mass celebrations’ while bearers of lanterns hasten to the airport. Planes depart carrying the cargo ‘to Athens, Tbilisi and Moscow in time for the midnight services.’ According to Teller, this ‘sure’ sign of the Resurrection seems to have started as far back as the second century.

Within half a kilometre of Holy Sepulchre in a southerly slightly easterly direction is the Jewish Quarter. Redeveloped since 1967, Teller describes this district as ‘a gentrified, Westernised, up market residential enclave.’ In sympathy with the rest of the Old City, the buildings here have been clad in stone, their unweathered edges and brighter tones accentuate that they are fairly new. Teller squirrels around in this neighbourhood for whatever remains of the old mosques and synagogues, but the area is changing.

Whilst Jews may purchase houses and businesses almost anywhere in Jerusalem, non-Jews cannot. The ‘right of return’ which in Israel may sanction the reclamation and the seizure of property shows no such favour to other than Jews. ‘Not one Palestinian family has regained their pre-1948 home in West Jerusalem, many of which still stand,’ whilst the restyled residencies for Jews wanting to live in the Old City have absorbed what used to be the Kurdish Quarter and are now extending in a westerly direction around the Syriac, Maronite and Armenian churches ‘evicting Palestinian tenants and replacing them with Israelis.’

Within this expanding estate, Teller introduces the reader to two minorities. The Lubavitches are fundamentalists, out on the streets, inviting fellow Jews to pray with them in order to hasten the coming of the Messiah. The Karaites are very different. Their 8th century founder, Anan ben David, was an anti-rabbinical dissident who turned aside from tradition and the Talmud. Rather like a Martin Luther he urged his followers ’to search carefully in the scriptures [the Torah] and don’t rely on my opinions.’ Removing their shoes when entering the synagogue, prostrating in prayer – which mainstream Judaism explicitly forbids – allowing women to take a lead in prayers, the Karaites are beyond the pale for Israel’s Chief Rabbinate, which refuses to authorise their marriages. ‘In a polity which only functions because of sharp – and strictly enforced – ethno-religious divisions between in-groups and

out-groups such a statement has serious implications.' Teller descends a score of steps and peers into the Karaites' place of worship, founded in the city 1,200 years ago: 'Thick pillars of stone sprouted typical Jerusalem cross-vaulting. Pewter lamps hung on chains, each with a Star of David dangling beneath. I thought about the tyranny of majorities, especially religious ones, but what rang loudest in my head was the hunch that Judaism and Islam share more, superficially and at their spiritual cores, than either is prepared these days to acknowledge – and more, it seems to me, than either has ever shared with Christianity.'

His description of the Jewish Quarter portrays it as comfortably relaxed: 'Women push their pushchairs, men push their sunglasses, kids push each other, tourists suck on milkshakes at café tables set out under trees … it's as if the world is a just and happy place.' Five hundred metres to the north, however, at the junction of Al-Wad with the Via Dolorosa the scene witnessed in an earlier chapter is very different: 'shops selling trainers, biscuits and replacement TV remotes.' The security cameras are clearly visible as are the police, toting guns, 'as if to remind Palestinian shoppers of the multi-layered, multinational humiliations this street corner might represent for them. It makes me press my lips together and think – This city wears its history like a teenager wears school uniform, joylessly.'

Much joy in Jerusalem was lost prior to and during 1967: 'Scarcely before the gun barrels had cooled [than] the inhabitants of the Maghebi Quarter founded by Saladin's son Afdal, were evacuated to new homes, their houses demolished to open space before the Wall.' (Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Jerusalem, the biography* (2011) p502). Slum clearance? I see from its archives the *Jerusalem Post* used exactly that phrase the day after the night of 10th June '67 and went on to declare of this 700 year-old Moroccan quarter: 'its existence will vanish altogether from the pages of Zionist history.' Teller interviews an eye witness living still in an apartment at the edge of 'the space'. He also quotes from the engineer who had charge of the levelling. 'Do it fast' was the missive, Ben Gurion wanted the Maghebi razed, it was a stinking eye-sore. Fragrance of another kind is in Teller's mind. He titles his chapter The Fig Tree of Maslohi, in honour of the largest of the figs and pomegranates that grew in the curtilages of a couple of mosques and 136 sundry buildings including the homes of 650 war-innocent Jerusalemites. Theirs was the luck to live beside a boundary wall of the Jewish Temple which the Romans destroyed in 70CE.

The Western Wall first attracted veneration in the 16th century. It is a potent reminder that for two thousand years almost, the religion of Jews has developed in the absence of a

Temple. Jewish prayers yearn for its re-creation but its associated practices such as animal sacrifice are 'antithetical to the praxis and spirit of Judaism' (Yair Wallach, Head of Jewish Studies, University of London). Teller would concur, but he is sceptical of what has taken its place: 'Should we really locate the transcendent Godhead in one precise spot in physical space? … I look up at the broad, tall, blankly enigmatic focus … in front of which I myself was barmitzvah one hot day long ago. War. The absence of Temple. Revenge is the absence of compassion.'

What was going through his mind at this point was almost certainly the expulsion of the one thousand and two hundred dwellers of the Jewish Quarter around the time of the birth of Israel as a modern state. And how, nearly two decades later, an Israeli force was tasked with an order that is still seen by leaders of the Western World as legitimate redress. In 1948 scores of Palestinian villages were eradicated with a liberal use of dynamite, sometimes with 'the enemy' still in their homes. Often the ruins were sown with mines to prevent re-occupation. Years later, for senior Israeli command, cleansing the Maghebi was a time-honoured procedure. Teller narrates how at nightfall Israeli troops went banging on doors shouting to the residents to get up and leave. At dawn, amid clouds of dust, bulldozers appeared, 'roaring along their metal chains to the tunes of victory music' - a peaceful few stalwarts who had ignored the warnings were crushed into the rubble alongside their fruit trees. Now what we see is the Western Wall Plaza, with blue and white flags, military ceremonies, tourists posing for selfies, and the observant offering fervent prayers. (I notice there is a website where anyone of any faith can send a prayer to a volunteer who will write it down and press it along with thousands of others into a crack in the Wall. Every so often the prayer-slips are collected and deposited on the Mount of Olives).

In his closing chapter, Teller refers to the Haitian scholar Michel-Rolph Trouillot who has argued that 'history is not simply the recording of facts and events but a process of actively enforced silences.' In any history we need to be aware – as in the example above – at the attempts at silences; the greatest of these is that which portrays Palestine early last century as an empty land, ripe for colonisation. In any account of Jerusalem there are bound to be omissions, as Teller concedes, and as his critics have not failed to notice (see Yuval Ben Ami in the *Jerusalem Post*, 14th May 2022). Teller has at least broken some of the silences and he obliges us to see that Jerusalem is something more than an object of our acculturation. Unconscious silences are surely forgivable if a work does not pretend to be the definitive story, but nevertheless achieves its aim to give voice to those who might not otherwise be

heard, an example being Jerusalem's resilient women: Rabia, mystic, poet, celibate, proto-feminist and Islam's first female saint; and Amoun, a leader of the Domari gypsies.

Let me end this appraisal imagining the Via Dolorosa, 2nd Station of the Cross, near to where a loquacious Ayman Qaisi and his wife live with their three young children in what Teller describes as a small stone cottage. Ayman runs a one-man refreshment stop, serving pilgrims with juices and fresh coffee. He had spent his youth living through two intifadas, and then in what he disparagingly refers to as wasted years, working around Europe. Questioned as to why he returned to Jerusalem, his response is disarmingly simple: 'I love it man. I love my home. After all that, I said to myself I would not live outside this country.'