

HISTORY OF CHRISTIAN PILGRIMAGE

Today the holy city of Jerusalem is a major site of Christian pilgrimage. However in the first 3 centuries of Christianity's existence, there was no expectation of pilgrimage. God was believed to be everywhere and the presence of the Holy Spirit enabled Christians to connect with God anywhere.

Jesus was Jewish, his followers were Jewish. Early Christianity was not a new religion but a sect of Judaism. Jews in Jesus' lifetime were under Roman occupation, as were many other tribal and cultural groups. In 70 CE, the Romans destroyed the Temple of Jerusalem after a Jewish rebellion. This was an incredibly dislocating event for Jews. The Temple, in the land of Israel, were held to be crucial for the continuation of the Jewish way of life. In the devastating years after the Temple's destruction, Christians came to believe that the Jewish laws could be fulfilled through the teaching and life of Jesus, with the support of the Holy Spirit.

The Romans tried to build a new temple to the goddess Venus on the site of the Jewish temple, sparking another Jewish rebellion. In 135 CE the rebellious Jews were brutally put down, the whole city of Jerusalem was destroyed and the Jews were banned from Israel for hundreds of years.

The fortunes of this persecuted sect of Judaism changed dramatically in the early 4th Century when the Roman emperor Constantine converted to Christianity, and with him the Roman Empire. As the state religion of a powerful empire, the sites of Christianity's early history took on significance. Constantine encouraged journeys to Israel and the city of Jerusalem. He ordered new churches and shrines to be built in sites in Jerusalem believed to be connected to Jesus, such as his tomb and Bethlehem. A map of a land, known as the 'holy land' emerged, as more sites were identified and reified.

Gradually, from an interesting geographical tour, visits to the Holy Land became places to encounter spiritual depth and meaning, in the sites where the events of Jesus' life had taken place. By the late 4th Century pilgrims experienced great emotion, trembling, shaking and increased devotion to God. Even at the time questions were raised; why would an omnipotent God require believers to make a journey to a place? How could an all-powerful God seem to be more accessible in one place over another? Bishop Gregory of Nyssa noted that Jesus did not suggest his followers should make special journeys in order to connect with God. He stated 'change of place does not effect any drawing nearer unto God' (Epistle 2). Moreover pilgrimage was expensive and made the pilgrim vulnerable to attack or moral corruption. However the desire to see and feel a place was strong.

Some places came to be seen as holy through their connection to Jesus, or their connection to people close to him. Later places came to be seen as holy through their connection with saints. The sites of pilgrimage associated with saints enlarged the map of Christian pilgrimage from the Holy Land to the whole of the Christian empires. From the 2nd century Christians who had been martyred for their beliefs were highly respected. Their deaths were celebrated because they reflected pure faith. These were the early saints, who were believed to be in heaven with God following their martyrdom. At sites of pilgrimage honouring the various saints, relics were displayed and became a focal point for veneration. Relics included scraps of cloth or even bone or hair said to belong to the saint, or items such as cups, books and jewelry. Visiting these relics became a huge part of Christian pilgrimage, especially for Europeans who could not travel to the Middle East. Pilgrims came expect physical or spiritual healing from such a visit, further increasing the popularity of such journeys.

As the early sites of pilgrimage in the Holy Land allowed Christians to connect with God, shrines to the relics of the saints performed the same function. They provided a connection point between heaven and earth, a focal point for worship and prayer.