Introduction

SPIRITS OF PLACES, FRACTURES IN TIME: TOWARD A NEW HISTORY OF JERUSALEM

Jerusalem, historical comet whose history is reduced almost to a long burning wake, placed on its scorched hill like a rocket on its launchpad—so much fury of eternity in such a small body—Pythian city, epileptic city, gasping ceaselessly at the trance of the future.

Julien Gracq, Lettrines, March 1967

How to write the history of an “epileptic city”? How to calmly tell the story of a city crushed by memories, exhausted by identities, compacted under the pressure of projections and projects, ground down by speeches and strategies, dismembered by claims and appropriations? Jerusalem doesn’t belong to itself; Jerusalem isn’t in Jerusalem; Jerusalem is a global city, a city where the whole world meets periodically, to face up to, to confront, to size up each other.

The shared cradle of three monotheistic narratives, Jerusalem is observed by the whole world as the laboratory of living together or of civil war, of urbanity or of hatred of the other. In recent years, at the mercy of the combats and confrontations that periodically run through the city, Jerusalem has become the favored stage on which to project dangerous fantasies of evildoers forging a clash of civilizations.

Julien Gracq, in March 1967, perfectly translated the overwhelming impression that grabs every reasonable historian in approaching Jerusalem as one approaches a molten crater: “historical comet,” “long burning wake,” prophetic or “Pythian city,” which exhausts itself in preserving the most ancient past and auguring the most distant future, held
under pressure in an almost infinite chronological arc, from Genesis to the Apocalypse. In these conditions, how to offer a new history of Jerusalem, how to construct a renewed history of a city recounted a thousand times, overexposed, worn out by the conjunction of reputedly incompatible narratives and by the weave of superimposed identities?

We say it straightaway: the four authors assembled here refuse to consider Jerusalem the coatrack of false identities; they oppose head-on the nebulous doctrine of the clash of civilizations; they wager that the history of Jerusalem can be told without resorting to anachronistic reductions that make all of its inhabitants into passive puppets, bearers despite themselves of crude identities that today carry the simplistic names of “Jews,” “Christians,” and “Muslims.” A ground-level history, respectful of ambivalences and ambiguities, closer to the fractures of time and the spirits of places: that, on the contrary, is what is offered in the following pages.

To meet this challenge, we must start first of all with this surprising paradox: Jerusalem is a city without history. Heritage is omnipresent, archaeological remains are everywhere, memories are thundering, identities are deafening, but history, in the middle of this crazy cacophony, is absent. History as a human and social science, as a scientific discipline, as an attempt to confront the sources and the association of points of view. . . . History is absent from Jerusalem, or rather it has absented itself and let itself be buried under the pile of memories. Rigorous historians work, of course, they do their best, but they are inaudible, invisible, confined among their peers in scholarly meetings and specialized academic exchanges, because this pointillistic approach is less risky for them, but also because the dominant political and social demand is for something else: Jerusalem is a store of memory, not a place of history. Universal black box, world conservatory of ancient traditions—we turn toward it to search for lost memories of a forgetful West, to reinforce the leached identities of our modern disenchantment, but rarely to truly know its history.

Is it a coincidence that up to now there has been no “History of Jerusalem from Its Origins to the Present Day” available on the book market, in either French or English? This simple fact is in itself disconcerting: although the Holy City fascinates the whole world, no serious synthesis has been offered to the public until now that attempts a global understanding of the history
Map 1. Topography of Jerusalem
of this city, which is always called “extraordinary” or “exceptional,” the better to exclude it from any rational approach.¹

A city without history, therefore, asphyxiated by memories that short-circuit and scramble its chronology: in the logic of memory, time is compacted, compressed, folded in on itself. As in a César Baldaccini “Compression,” the very structure of passing time, the succession of epochs and sequences of events disappears to give place to “eternal” identities, to “perpetual” conflicts, and to “immutable” communities. One encounters so many expressions in all the pages of the books devoted to the Holy City and offered to the general public. To counter this indigestible salmagundi, to make Jerusalem a true object of history, we will thus commence by respecting its chronology—we will attempt to identify distinct historical sequences of events to show that Jerusalem is not a city more “eternal” than any other and that each of its epochs tells a singular story. Of course, moving back and forth in the chronology and overlap between chapters aren’t forbidden in the pages you will read, but we will abstain from too much ruffling of calendar pages, because the succession of generations, of regimes, and of contexts is an essential safeguard against the illusion of identity permanence. At the end of this volume, a new time line gives the public, for the first time, a chronological synthesis of reference, complete and detailed.

Second paradox, perhaps less noticeable to nonspecialists: Jerusalem is a city without geography. Geopolitics is summoned all the time there to explain everything, borders seem to stripe its territory in every direction, maps are systematically exhibited to illustrate the great episodes of its military history, but geography as attention to topography, to elevation, to the constraints of site and the potentials of location, to climate and soils, to the layout of urban districts, to their peopling, to their activities and interactions . . . geography is absent, masked by the omnipresence of geopolitical analysis. The history of Jerusalem is generally recounted without the places (streets, monuments, hills, valleys, springs, rocks, caves, walls, cemeteries) having to be anything other than a map of a general staff or a simple setting for folkloric or patrimonial use.

In this logic, the history of Jerusalem generally ends up disembodied, as if evaporated, developing at several meters from the urban area, simple layout of ideas and actors moving in an abstract and inarticulate space.
The altitude of the city, perched at almost eight hundred meters (half a mile) at the summit of a narrow crest line; its severe climate, at once Mediterranean and mountainous; its dominant hills and deep ravines, which have forever oriented its main axes of circulation (see map 1); its position on the threshold between the rich coastal plains that border the Mediterranean to the west and the desert that plunges toward the Jordan Rift Valley and the stifling banks of the Dead Sea to the east—all of these basic facts are generally passed over in silence, as if geography had little weight in explaining the history of the Holy City. To offer a history that is incarnate, concrete, and situated in Jerusalem, we will therefore respect its geography—we will try to always refer to the places that order and shape this history, that give it their potentialities and constraints. To illustrate and accompany this “geographical requirement,” ten original maps over the course of the book will permit readers to not lose sight of the terrain and to not get lost themselves.

To construct a new history of Jerusalem, we have thus chosen to rely on the most proved methods and to renew the marriage of two old academic disciplines, history and geography, whose long complicity is one of the happy original features of French universities. Starting from these two solid bases, it is possible to construct a history at once contextualized and situated, diachronic and geographic.

To escape from the abstract developments of immutable identities that pollute most of the accounts consecrated to the Holy City, a third and final principle has guided the writing of this new history of Jerusalem: starting from the observation that the Holy City is the site of the emergence and meeting of the three monotheisms, we have not wanted to consider the boundaries between these three traditions as impassable limits that have remained immobile over the centuries. Quite on the contrary, the porousness, the movements, the exchanges, and the hybridizations between these traditions have been the subject of very particular attention. Not from a fetishism of multiculturalism, but because Jerusalem itself imposes this approach: because the thrice-holy city magnetizes the foundational monotheistic traditions and concentrates them within a restricted perimeter and on a few recurrent focal points, its history is precisely that of the intense interaction among these traditions, giving rise to a large number of exchanges and transfers.
By focusing our attention on the emblematic segments that structure the urban space—on the Temple Mount / Haram al-Sharif (also called the Esplanade of the Mosques), on the walls that have often moved but whose topographical structure has remained almost unchanged, on the gates and the axes of circulation that order the city and set it in motion, on the valleys that surround Jerusalem and each preserve a particular bundle of religious traditions—we can show that the spirit of these places traverses ruptures in time and preestablished identity categories by effecting surprising transfers of sacredness. Finally, the attention paid to Jerusalem’s religious places and geography makes it possible to restore the coherence and dynamics of this world city’s urban history, a history at once organic and connected, local and global, anchored in its territory and open to the four winds, because Jerusalem rightfully deserves, perhaps more than any other city on the planet, to benefit from these new horizons of history.