10-1-1997

*Jerusalem: One City, Three Faiths* Karen Armstrong; *Jerusalem: The Eternal City* David B. Galbraith, D. Kelly Ogden and Andrew C. Skinner

Gordon A. Madsen

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq

Recommended Citation


This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in BYU Studies Quarterly by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.


Reviewed by Gordon A. Madsen, an attorney in Salt Lake City, Utah.

Two summary histories of Jerusalem, the Holy City, both written in 1996 on the eve of the three-thousandth anniversary of David’s establishment of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital, could scarcely be more different. One is written by a former Roman Catholic nun who left her order to study at Oxford and later taught at Leo Baeck College for the Study of Judaism. She has written a biography of Mohammed, a history of the Crusades, and, more recently, her *History of God*. The other study is a collaboration written primarily for a Mormon audience by three LDS educators, all of whom have served for various periods on the faculty of the BYU Center for Near Eastern Studies at Jerusalem.

The subtitles of both books give us a clue as to their theses. Armstrong writes of Jerusalem as “one city, three faiths.” With the smooth prose of a seasoned storyteller, her history recounts man’s repeated inhumanity to man in the Holy City. Galbraith, Ogden, and Skinner, on the other hand, see Jerusalem as “the eternal city,” constantly in God’s mind and purposes. One is secular history; the other is providential history.

*Three Faiths* has a threefold agenda. Its first basic premise is that the Old Testament is a collection of myths, at least until the time of David. Armstrong argues that the first five books of the Bible cannot be considered “historical in our sense” (25), by which she means that the stories of Abraham, Moses, the Judges, and other pre-Davidic personalities were the invention of later chroniclers and were created to legitimize Israel as a chosen people of God and to justify their claim to the land of Canaan. She ignores a considerable body of pre-Davidic evidence and scholarship in holding to that premise.
Armstrong’s second undergirding premise is that mortal contact with the divine is unknowable, or better, essentially indescribable (147–48). She rejects, out of hand, divine explanations for Jerusalem’s history, preferring rationalist interpretations that describe the city’s history in terms of purely human foibles and appetites.

These two premises lend themselves to the broader framework she builds, contrasting the irrational history and experience of the true believer against the scientific and historically more accurate account she provides. Unfortunately, Armstrong’s use of the tools of scientific history is not always sure-handed. At one point, she asserts that David adopted wholesale the religious practices of the Jebusites (the inhabitants of Jerusalem at the time of David’s conquest) (39–41). In so arguing, she leaves many features and furnishings of the temple unaccounted for—features that other scholars assert originated in Israelite history before the time of David.1 Moreover, Armstrong ignores the whole subject of prophecy and specifically those prophecies that concern Jerusalem itself.

The third and most pervasive premise repeated throughout Three Faiths is that “all the great religions insist that the test of true spirituality is practical compassion. . . . Some of the worst atrocities have occurred when people have put the purity of Jerusalem and the desire to gain access to its great sanctity before the quest for justice and charity” (xxi). Having gently chided Jews, Christians, and Muslims through most of the book for not living up to their belief systems, she concludes, “The societies that have lasted the longest in the holy city have, generally, been the ones that were prepared for some kind of tolerance and coexistence” (427). She thus deplores the use of myth or religion to justify land grabs (as she views the city’s history) and unapologetically tells all factions in Jerusalem that they should get along with each other. It is one thing to take all three faiths to task for not living up to their systems of belief in terms of human relations, but it is quite another audacious presumption to tell them in the name of “objective history” that their religions are all wrong. It further becomes hypocritical when “objective history” takes factual vacations and itself is used to promote one, albeit attractive, political objective.
Ultimately, her effort leaves one important problem unaddressed. That is, having mythologized the God that all three faiths owe the duty to love and obey, she provides no alternative imperative for loving or serving one another as a basis for achieving peace and harmony. Put simply, Armstrong assumes that stripping the three faiths of their imperative to love God will cause their adherents to automatically or spontaneously love their fellowman in some form of secular utopia. The last century’s experience with secular utopias should give pause enough to consider exactly what it means to tell one quarter of the earth’s population that God never lived in his city.

*The Eternal City*, although very different from *Three Faiths*, is an equally programmatic study. Growing largely out of the BYU Study Abroad program at the Jerusalem Center, it is a serious effort to survey and include biblical and archaeological scholarship, augmented and interpreted primarily by Latter-day Saint revelation.

The city’s history thus begins with Melchizedek. The authors draw heavily on texts in Genesis (expanded by Joseph Smith’s translations), together with passages in Alma and the Doctrine and Covenants. Melchizedek and Abraham are historic persons in this book, not mythological creations. Abraham’s offering of Isaac on Mt. Moriah, these authors argue, identifies and sanctifies the site for the temples subsequently built there.

Considerably less emphasis on the Islamic involvement in Jerusalem appears in *The Eternal City* than is found in *Three Faiths*. A wealth of information is offered, however, about the Latter-day Saint involvement in Jerusalem, beginning with Orson Hyde and continuing to the present, including prophecies (biblical and LDS) concerning the Holy City.

Since these authors include LDS sources in their study, a stronger coverage in that area would have added even further insights. For example, they include Joseph Smith’s translation of Luke 2:46, detailing Jesus’ visit to the temple at age twelve, which makes the distinction that he answered the doctors in the temple but asked no questions himself. The authors could (and should, in this reviewer’s opinion) have included the Joseph Smith Translation version of Matthew 3:25, “and he spake not as other men, neither could he be taught; for he needed not that any man should
teach him.” The authors’ historical scholarship lapses occasionally as well. For example, their assertion that the Palestinian Talmud was composed in Jamnia (or Jabneh) is disputed, if not discarded, by scholars. On the other hand, the inclusion of topographical and geological information, including maps, and of a glossary of biblical, Midrashic, Islamic, and other terms is very useful.

The providential orientation in this book leads on occasion to exaggeration. It surely overstates the matter to claim that “throughout history [Jerusalem] has stood for holiness, for ascendency, for centrality. Jerusalem is the connection—the umbilical cord—between heaven and earth” (488). Such excess not only reflects misdirected zeal, but also can lead to potentially inflammatory innuendos.

Again, *The Eternal City* describes the BYU Jerusalem Center as being “not unlike the Temples of old, where the faithful gathered by the thousands to be instructed in spiritual matters” (470). Even though the authors presumably wrote this sentence intending to describe the center in an academic sense rather than in a Jewish context of God’s house of spiritual instruction, the latter association might easily be made. It is well, therefore, to keep in mind the disclaimer given in the preface of *The Eternal City* that “these interpretations and opinions do not necessarily represent the official position of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints or any other ecclesiastical or educational institution” (x). No one need conclude from this volume that Latter-day Saints have built the millennial temple or that the BYU center is destined to become such.

Much remains to be learned about Jerusalem, both its history and its destiny. Rabbinical traditions, latter-day revelation, and the purposes of God among all of his children on this earth remind us that we really do not know much about God’s future plans for Jerusalem and its temple. The question of whether Latter-day Saints are to be spectators, participants, or both, and to what extent, is, at best, speculation.

These two volumes make a direct and pervasive contrast between a secular and a providential approach to Jerusalem’s history. The best of both is necessary to enable one to come to understand the richness of the Holy City’s past.
NOTES
