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Publication Date

2020

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Undergraduate

God, Allah and the Stones of Time

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Ancient Near East 12W (Winter 2020)

March 23, 2020

“The square stones of the Wall, arranged one on top of the other, joined together with no sign of cement; these stones which, scratched and cracked though they be, are not consumed in the teeth of time, are a symbol to the people that stands before them in prayer... How can they fail to excite and exalt the heart of every Jew who comes for the first time to the Wall?!” (A.S. Hirschberg, *Eretz Hemdah*)

What is it about these stones that evokes such emotions in this early 20th century traveler to the Western Wall? This sacred space, located on Jerusalem’s Eastern Hill, is holy to Jews and Muslims. Jerusalem has holy sites for all monotheistic religions. The Church of the Holy Sepulcher is a primary sacred space for Christians. Muslims pray at the *Al Aqsa* Mosque and the Dome of the Rock. These buildings, as monuments of architecture, are visual representations of the greatness of the faith traditions they stand for. However, the Western Wall is not a building, but simply a wall. This characteristic of the Western Wall raises a crucial question: why is it so revered by Jewish communities? The answer to this question is complicated and must be approached by looking at the physical history of the Wall. It depends on who asks the question and when. In stating: “So political processes, social relations, and economic forces mark religious spaces, and, therefore, they are sites where power is negotiated as meaning is made,” Thomas Tweed asserts that the meaning of a religious space is linked not only to religious beliefs, but also evolves over time as a result of shifts in political power and culture (121). Thus, the answer to the question above can be derived through this lens. The Western Wall, its multi-national appeal, its history and its relevance in current affairs, is a pristine example of a religious space that conflates religious doctrine, national identity, and political power. Depending when and where the observer is and which tradition he follows, its significance shifts.

What did Hirschberg see that impacted him so deeply? What we see today is a modified version of what he perceived in 1901. Today, there is greater access to the Wall as a consequence of Israel’s capture of East Jerusalem in the Six Days War of 1967. Nevertheless, imagine a traveler entering Jerusalem’s Old City through the Jaffa Gate, passing eastward through the

Armenian Quarter and the Cardo and descending the steps to the Western Wall. A first glimpse reveals an enormous plaza, usually populated by devotees and tourists, that ends in a long ancient wall, 19 meters high, flanked by limestone buildings on either side. Adjoining the Wall to the east, on the Haram al-Sharif, the golden top of the Dome of the Rock shines in the light of the Jerusalem sun. Across the platform to the south we see a glimpse of the *Al Aqsa* Mosque. The wall does not rise uniformly, as about three fourth is made of enormous stones with chiseled borders. The stones weigh between two and eight tons, as originally described by Meir Ben-Dov, one of the archaeologists leading an excavation shortly after the Wall was captured (42). The upper layer consists of smaller stones that were added during the Ottoman rule of Suleiman in 1541 (Armstrong 324).

The Western Wall adjoins the Temple Mount where once Solomon's Temple stood, and where now the Muslim holy sites of the Dome of the Rock and the *Al Aqsa* Mosque stand. The entire Western Wall of the Temple Mount is about 485 meters long (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs). However, only a portion of 57 meters is used for prayer. On the southwestern corner are the remains of Robinson's Arch, which is now an area reserved for non-traditional pluralistic worship. North of this is the official Jewish prayer space, where a partition separates men and women as per Orthodox Jewish custom. Orthodoxy is the only denomination sanctioned by Israel's rabbinate. According to this tradition, men are required to pray at certain times of the day but women are exempt and thus have access to less than one third of the space. Prior to 1967, even though the prayer space was considerably smaller, Jews also observed this separation during prayer, as it is rooted in *halakhic* tradition. Returning his gaze to the Wall, the traveler sees shrubs growing amidst the stones with little folded notes holding prayers and wishes which were left by visitors, squeezed into the cracks of the stones. To the left of the men's prayer area

is Wilson's Arch, made of limestone buildings, that houses the entrance to the tunnels underneath, revealing archaeological excavations. In Herodian times, this was a viaduct that spanned from the upper city across the Tyropean Valley to the Temple Mount at the northern gate on the Western Wall, allowing visitors entry for the purpose of pilgrimage (Klein 96).

The Western Wall we see today is the remnant of the temenos wall of the Temple Mount built by King Herod in 19 BCE (Armstrong 130). Under Roman rule, Herod, himself a Jew, was appointed king of the Jews. He envisioned a grand transformation of Jerusalem as testament to himself. The Temple was both a place of worship and a political stronghold. Due to its religious significance he ensured that religious laws, customs and continuity of worship were upheld, while he made improvements to the Temple for eighteen months (Levine 223). He intended to make it a grand architectural structure in order to assure that the Temple was always remembered (Goldhill *The Temple* 58). This kept him in favor with the Jewish population and allowed him to fulfill his vision to host Romans in elegant style. He took the opportunity to construct the entire Temple Mount area, adding substantial space for the Temple courtyards. Following a Hellenistic architectural model, he increased the flat area of the Temple Mount by enclosing the hill with walls on the south, west and north and maintaining the eastern wall that was associated with the structure of Solomon's Temple (Levine 227, 232). The Western Wall was the longest of these walls and adjoined the popular area of the Lower Market (Armstrong 126-130). To the north of the western wall, he built a bridge over the Tyropean valley and to the south he built a large staircase for access to the mount (Levine 228). The resulting large courtyard, the *forum*, was used for ritual functions, gatherings of the supreme court, the *Sanhedrin*, and for commerce (235). It was the perfect platform for hosting large Roman-style gatherings.

Herod's choice of location was smart, because the Jews had always known the Temple Mount to be sacred. This was the center of Jewish cult and spirituality, where sacrifices were made in accordance with the laws of the Torah. It was also the site of the Foundation Stone (*Even Shetiyah*) which the sages in the Mishna and Tosefta attribute to the site where God created the world. Consequently, the Temple Mount became the original *axis mundi* (Koltun-Fromm 356, 361). It is also biblical Mount Moriah, where Abraham was to sacrifice Isaac, where David had built an altar to God for preventing his people's annihilation and where thus Solomon had built the First Temple to YHWH (*Genesis 22*, *2 Samuel 24:19*, *1 Kings 6-8*). A later biblical work, *II Chronicles 3:1-2*, specifies that they are all the same location. During the First Temple period, the Ark of the Covenant resided in the Holy of Holies and housed the presence of the Divine. From Herod's perspective, the Temple had once been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BCE and this destruction had left a deep loss in the Jewish psyche. Protecting the Temple was of religious importance and thus, by improving it and building around it, Herod ingratiated himself with the Jews because he was architecturally validating their sacred space. Lee Levine illustrates this by quoting Herod's speech to the people of Jerusalem regarding the rebuilding of the Temple:

I now propose to undertake [...] the most pious and beautiful [enterprise] of our time...

For this was the Temple which our fathers built to the Most Great God after their return from Babylon, but it lacks sixty cubits [over thirty yards] in height, the amount by which the first Temple, built by Solomon, exceeded it. (221)

Herod states that the Second Temple, as built by the Persians, did not measure up to the size of Solomon's Temple and thus he intends to bring it back to its old glory.

The Jewish relationship to the Wall begins after Titus' destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, as it is now the singular material remembrance Jews had of either First or Second Temple. After 70 CE Jews could no longer practice their cult. The destruction left only the large supporting walls of the Temple platform and everything around it was left in ruins (Armstrong 153). After the Bar Kochba revolts (135 CE) the tradition developed that the perforated rock on the Temple Mount was the *Even Shetiyah* and "the navel of the world from which Creation had begun" (Frenkel 346). The Wall remained the center of their religious world, even though the Temple had been destroyed. Then, as in future generations, it commemorated the religious idea that God had dwelt in that space and protected them. It also commemorated the political idea that they had had a kingdom under a Davidic king, with autonomy and independence. Diaspora life meant that Jews were dependent on the benevolence of their hosts, their survival frequently being threatened, as in their expulsion from Spain, the pogroms and the Holocaust. Thus, self-rule parallel to Davidic times needed to be achieved and happened only much later in 1948 with the establishment of the State of Israel.

Under Islamic Umayyad rule, Jewish passion for the Wall continued and a new Muslim focus on the Temple Mount emerged. This became evident when Caliph Abd al-Malik restored the Temple Mount in 691 on which he erected the Dome of the Rock, which was the first major Islamic building in Jerusalem. He built the edifice around a rock in the pavement, which was later thought to be the Foundation Stone, holy to Muslims for many reasons, the most significant of which is that Muhammad had ascended to heaven in his Night Journey from this rock (Armstrong 237). As with Jews, Muslims thought that this was the original place of God's creation. Additionally, Muslims revere Abraham as the first Muslim, as he submitted to God in his willingness to heed his command to sacrifice his son. Thus, the *Even Shetiyah* is holy to Muslims as well, as is the Western Wall, being adjacent to the *Haram al-Sharif* (Temple Mount).

Under Ottoman rule the Jewish connection to the Western Wall intensified as they had access to it once again. Of note, as will be discussed later, Rabbinic literature teaches that all the walls of Herod's Temple were destroyed except for the Western Wall, as this is where the Divine resides, giving it protection. This illuminates Jewish thought about the sanctity of the Western Wall. Seeing the city in ruins after its conquest from the Crusaders, Suleiman, the Ottoman sultan, ordered all the city walls to be rebuilt in 1536 in an effort to modernize the city. The Western Wall was refurbished with remnant stones from prior destruction and these are the smaller stones we see on the upper portion of the Wall today (Armstrong 327). For Jews, the Wall remained the only physical association with the *Even Shetiyah*, the Holy of Holies and the Temple and it thus became their singular sacred space. Over the span on history, in light of the loss of political autonomy, the Jews saw control over Jerusalem transfer from Roman, to Byzantine, to Islam rule with varying levels of access to the Wall based on who ruled.

To better appreciate the dynamics of the Western Wall through the ages, to fathom the despair Jews felt upon the loss of their Temple, and to understand its importance to Muslim traditions, a review of historical sources at various times in history is necessary. By looking at sources in the earliest history, such as the Hebrew Bible and the account of first-century historian Flavius Josephus, who chronicled the destruction of Jerusalem, we can compare them to later Jewish writings in the *Midrash*, which are commentaries on the Bible. As such, we can track the development of the meaning of the Western Wall within Jewish identity. Similarly, the importance of the *Haram al-Sharif* (and thus the Western Wall) to Muslims, is best understood when looking at the Qur'anic verses and the Hadith that build upon them.

While Josephus describes the destruction of Jerusalem in detail, he also highlights the Temple's importance to the Jews: "But there was nothing that affected the nation as so much, in

the calamities they were under, as that their holy place, which had been hitherto seen by none, should be laid open to strangers;" (Josephus 7.6) In Jewish tradition, only the high priest had access to this area after scrupulous ritual cleansing and thus unauthorized entry into the area where the Divine rested was a disaster. He illuminates the magnitude of the loss, particularly in light of the fact that this was a repetition of history. Losing the Temple was "so mighty an affliction" to them, "that they [the Jews] were no longer willing to live." (Josephus 6.4.5)

In the context of ongoing Jewish political uprising against Roman rule, the loss of the Temple meant not only the loss of a place of worship, but also the loss of autonomy and political control, which Jews had already experienced once before in the 6th century BCE as a result of the Babylonian exile. This memory sat with the Jews and they ventured to regain their sovereignty. The soldier, Simon Bar Koseba, led a four-year revolt against Hadrian and, although it was eventually crushed, the Jews inflicted heavy casualties and were considered a threat to the Roman Empire. Consequently, Jews were banned from Jerusalem and all of Judea and lost all access to the Western Wall. They moved to areas in the Galilee where they later learned that their holy city had been renamed *Aelia Capitolina*, annihilating their Jewish Jerusalem, which sat at the center of their identity (Armstrong 162-164). Incidentally, this ban on Jews living in Jerusalem was not unique. For example, in the fourth century, Jews were banned from Jerusalem because they were seen to be a threat to Christianity; in order for Christianity to flourish Judaism had to decline (196). Jews were distanced from their religious space as a result of political circumstances. Jewish access to their sacred space was therefore unpredictable and in control of their rulers.

In 70 CE, as a result of the ban, Jews for whom the Western Wall served as a memory of God's creation, his favor and their Temple, no longer have access to it, which kindles a transition

in Jewish thinking. In reaction to this disaster, the significance of the Wall, while always remaining central to Jews, shifts in its interpretations of holiness, highlighting its kinetic nature. The focus turns from the historical connection of the Davidic kings, the Temple and the Holy of Holies, to the idea that the Temple Mount is the location of the *Even Shetiyah*, the origin of the world, and to the idea that some representation of God actually resides on the Western Wall. By doing this, the rabbis can reconcile the calamity of the Temple's destruction in that they are reconnecting the Jews with the origin of creation. Also, although the Temple had been destroyed, the rabbis ensured that the cult and symbolism around it remained vital in the liturgy of the Jewish people (Eliav 54). Incidentally, this change also had a political dimension in that the rabbis diminished the authority of the priests (and enforced their own) by establishing the pre-priestly divine authority (Koltun-Fromm 358).

Jewish historical writings show how the relevance to the Temple Mount changed over time. All biblical literature pre-dates 90 CE, as this is the earliest date known in which the Jewish Bible, the *Tanakh*, was canonized (Brettler 2073). One of the books in the *Tanakh*, the *Song of Songs*, is attributed to the Temple's builder King Solomon, dating his work to before 930 BCE (Armstrong 55). While on the surface this book is a collection of love poems between a man and a woman, one traditional Jewish interpretation is that this is a relationship between God and man (Stern 1564-1565). As such, in verse 2:9: "There he stands outside our wall" the "he" is the presence of God. While the early text makes no reference to the Temple, later explanations (*Midrashim*) of this text make a connection with it by mentioning the Western Wall. F.E Peters explains that the seventh century *Midrash Rabbah* interprets this text as God standing behind the Western Wall of the Temple, which would therefore never be destroyed. This is later enhanced in the tenth century text *Exodus Rabbah*, where Rabbi Aha explains: "The Presence of God never

leaves the Western Wall.” (Peters 226) This provides the rabbinic justification as to why the Western Wall was not destroyed.

A similar development is seen in other areas of Jewish tradition. *Lamentations* is a book in the Hebrew bible entirely dedicated to the loss of the First Temple. It is “a timeless book setting forth the eternal paradigm of Jewish suffering,” as Jews had lost their political power over their holy space which was their sacred center (Cohen 18,19). It lays out the psychological trauma of loss, destruction, and exile. Written immediately after the destruction of the Temple in 586 BCE (but certainly before the Temple was rebuilt) it subscribes to the theology that God rightfully punished Israel for its sins and thus destroyed the Temple (Grossberg 1587, 1589). Jews had disregarded the commandments and thus broken the covenant with YHWH, whose glory resided in the Holy of Holies. With the destruction of the Temple, God removed his presence from among the Jews. *Lamentations Rabbah* is a commentary on *Lamentations* that was written several hundred years later, by the fifth century CE. The two books share themes of the horror of devastation and God’s justice, but while *Lamentations* is full of despair, *Lamentations Rabbah* offers consolation and hope (Cohen 22). The rabbis accomplish this by mirroring the work of the rabbis in *Midrash Rabbah* and restoring the Divine presence to the Western Wall with a similar justification to why the Western Wall was saved: “Now it had been decreed by Heaven that this [the western gate] should never be destroyed because the *Shechina* [the divine presence] abode in the west.” (Midrash Rabbah Lamentations I. 5, §31).

In what had essentially become a permanent exile and in anticipation of redemption, the rabbis ensured that the collective remembrance of the Wall was kept alive by deepening its significance to the Jewish people (Becking 57, 58). In the 12th century, with the codification of Jewish law, Maimonides weaves together the conceptions of the Foundation Stone, the Temple,

the Western Wall and its holiness: “There was a stone in the Holy of Holies, at its western wall, upon which the Ark rested.” (Maimonides 1957:7) (Peters 227).

Another account is given by Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela, who also lived in the 12th century and was a traveler to Jerusalem. He did not have access to the Wall as it was forbidden to Jews during the period of the Crusaders (Armstrong 276). Viewing it from the Mount of Olives, he states in his chronicles that “the western wall, [xxx] is one of the walls of the Holy of Holies (Adler 21-22). With the progression of time, the Western Wall of the Temple was conflated with the Western Wall of the Temple Mount. The significance of the Wall evolved from a representation of the loss of cult and autonomy, into the larger idea that this is where God dwells. The building of this tradition through the continuous interpretations of the biblical texts would have arisen due to the prolonged state of the Jewish Diaspora. The first exile had lasted only a few generations and, in comparison, by the 12th century this one seemed eternal. Thus, as a consequence of the loss of political autonomy and power, the religious significance of the Wall changed. As I will discuss later, these evolving conceptions of the Wall in Jewish tradition were a reflection of certain power dynamics between Jewish communities and Christian and Islamic presence in the city.

Muslim traditions are also connected to the Temple Mount, but from a very different perspective. Jerusalem was the original direction of prayer, *qibla*, for Muslims in defiance of the forbidden idols Muhammad had seen at the Ka’bah in Mecca and in reverence of the *Haram al-Sharif*. However, in 624 Muhammad changed the *qibla* to Mecca, a political move because the Jews of Medina would not accept his religion (Armstrong 222). This was a significant shift in the tradition and reduced Jerusalem’s importance in relation to Mecca. From the 7th to the 11th centuries the narrative around the *Haram* revolved mainly around the idea that it was the location

of Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem (Kaplony 101). In contrast, Jews began venerating the Wall upon destruction of their Temple, and did this from a position of political weakness; they were a conquered people. Instead, Muslim tradition sees the Western Wall as an integral part of its holy site, the *Haram al-Sharif*, upon which they built the Dome of the Rock and the *Al Aksa* Mosque. They did this from a position of strength after the Umayyads conquered Jerusalem (Reiter 239). The contrasting political powers between Jews and Muslims as to the Temple Mount highlights Tweed's notion of how politics influence the perception of and access to sacred sites.

As evidence for Muslim connection to the *Haram al-Sharif*, the Qur'an tells of Abraham's sacrifice, which is also found in Genesis 22. It identifies him as the first Muslim, because he was the ancestor who was the first to submit to God in his willingness to sacrifice to him his beloved son. This quote from the Qur'an shows both Abraham and Isaac / Ishmael's devotion to God:

His father said to him, "My son, I have seen in a dream that I should sacrifice thee; therefore, consider what thou seest right." He said, "My father, do what thou art bidden; of the patient, if God please, shalt thou find me. (Qur'an, Sura 17)

The location of the sacrifice is taken from the Jewish tradition and thus ties Muslims to Jerusalem, to the Foundation Stone and the *Haram al-Sharif*. The Muslim faith included both Jewish and Christian traditions, and therefore Jerusalem figured prominently in their spiritual landscape, drawing many Muslims to Jerusalem. Sura 17 also states that Muhammad took a journey by night from the "sacred mosque" to the "farthest mosque." The Hadith, written a few hundred years after the Qur'an, interprets the "farthest mosque" to be the Foundation Stone, where Muhammad ascended to heaven in his Night Journey (Armstrong 222-224). Religiously, this is essential because it is when Muhammad received God's revelations.

So far, I have looked at various religious texts in understanding the meaning of the Western Wall to Jews and Muslims throughout history. To raise the discourse about what the Wall symbolizes as religious space, a responsible observer must also include historical data. Religious texts reflect the agenda of the clergy, whereas historical data reveal factual events, albeit usually from the bias of the victor. The empires that ruled Judea determined who had access to Jerusalem. He who won the war seized power, manipulated local politics and controlled religious practice. Thus, the analysis must include the interrelatedness of historical events and power dynamics as it pertains to the meaning of sacred space, as stated by Tweed. The Western Wall started out being the singularly sacred space for Jews. As history progressed, Islam developed and captured Jerusalem, and a Muslim tradition developed around the Temple Mount. The fact that it evolved later in time, does not diminish its relevance to Muslims. As a result of historical developments, the Western Wall is significant to Jews and Muslims, but how these traditions relate to the Wall varies.

The importance of the Western Wall to the Jews, as stated above, begins in 70 CE with the catastrophic loss of the Second Temple. This was a political defeat which had a religious impact, as Jews could no longer worship in their Temple. It gave rise to the veneration of the Western Wall as its symbol. Had this defeat never happened, Jews would still be worshipping the Temple. Or, had the Western Wall also fallen, the expanded traditions around it would not have evolved. The yearning to be close to the Wall resulted from the Jewish desire to be close to God and to be autonomous to practice their faith. The loss of their homeland brought a challenge in maintaining their identity and meant persecution throughout the ages, both in Judea and in the Diaspora.

Immediately after the destruction, worship began at the Wall in order to replace sacrifices, but political power dynamics impacted this throughout history (Frenkel 346). The Romans expelled the Jews after the Bar Kochba revolts in 135 CE. Worship was only allowed from the Mount of Olives once a year on the Ninth of Av. They were allowed to return after the Muslim conquest of Jerusalem in 638 and even assisted in cleansing the Temple Mount in preparation of building the Dome of the Rock, thinking that they would be rebuilding their Temple – a cultural outcome based on religious ideals. During the period of the Crusaders they were expelled again, kept away by the subsequent Mamluks and were eventually granted re-entry under Ottoman rule in 1187 (Friedman 142). By this time, the topography around the Wall had changed so much, that the Jews' historical knowledge of the location of the Holy of Holies could no longer be applied and thus Maimonides outlawed entering the Mount for fear of desecrating the area where once the Holy of Holies stood (Frenkel 350). Nevertheless, when Sultan Suleiman issued an edict to allow the Jews the 22-meter-long vacant portion of the Western Wall for prayer, worship transferred from the Mount of Olives to that location (Armstrong 327). Notably, this area was only several feet deep and could not hold many people.

The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, followed by its control of East Jerusalem during the Six Days War, changed the power dynamics over the Western Wall. It gave unrestricted Jewish access to the Temple Mount, as proclaimed by then Defense Minister Moshe Dayan (Loewenberg 47). Political developments leading up to the establishment of the State such as the growing desire for a homeland, Zionism, the Holocaust and Jewish immigration to Palestine created severe political and cultural tensions between Muslims and Jews (Goldhill *Jerusalem* 278-80). Capturing the Western Wall brought a religious element to secular Zionism, showing religious influence on a political idea. At this point, the realms of politics, religion,

economics and social relationship come together and, were they to be plotted onto a Venn diagram, the center point would illustrate the point of Tweed's quote I introduced in the opening paragraph. So, too, does this moment in Jewish history illustrate the synergy between those four realms. Jews, who did not identify as religious, became overwhelmed by the capture of this unique symbol of Jewish identity and this created patriotism among Israelis. Today, under Israeli sovereignty, the *Haram* continues to be ruled by Muslim authorities, demonstrating the complex nature of managing this religious space in light of parties that have diametrically opposing political objectives. Further, immediately after the Six Days War, as a result of a desire to accommodate large crowds, Israeli authorities razed the Moroccan *Maghribi* quarter adjacent to the Western Wall to create the plaza (Armstrong 402-403). Goldhill describes this as a symbolic gesture to Jews "after centuries of contention around the small pavement area that had been there." (*The Temple* 158) Nevertheless, this power shift made the 619 Muslim inhabitants of that quarter abandon their homes to allow greater access for Jewish pilgrims.

Incidentally, only few archaeological explorations happened in direct proximity to the Wall, due to the fact that it was prohibited by both Jewish authorities and the Muslim *Waqf* on account of the holiness of the space, exposing the complicated politics of digging. In 1865, when Jerusalem was part of the British Mandate, Captain Charles Wilson was able to explore the underground cisterns of the Haram and discovered the large arch which was later named in his honor. This is the arch to the left of the men's prayer site at the Wall today. While the residents saw his work and that of the Palestine Exploration Fund as "crusading archaeology", the British felt that they had a right to it due to their Christian connection to the Holy Land (Armstrong 360-361). There were two further consequential digs. In 1870, Sir Charles Warren was able to stealthily enter the Islamic sites for excavations. In an effort to affirm the accuracy of the biblical

account, he uncovered the passages under the Temple Mount that supplied water to the area, and he changed the contemporary idea of the location's topography (Goldhill *The Temple* 153-157). In the area known as the Ophel, he discovered an ancient Jebusite water conduit now known as "Warren's Shaft." (Armstrong 361) After 1967, Professor Mazar and Meir Ben-Dov started an excavation under the Temple Mount, with the use of some clandestine tactics. Their most significant discovery was a Hebrew inscription on a cornerstone from one of the walls referring to a trumpet call, which can be corroborated with the writings of Flavius Josephus, (Goldhill *Temple* 161). These accounts show how archaeological discoveries that would help bring an understanding about the history of Western Wall are reliant on who has political power over the site.

I have shown that Tweed's theory of how power influences access to religious space is validated through the example of the Western Wall. Tweed also says that the meaning of a religious space is dependent on the observer, as outlined in the introduction. To further illustrate this, there are two points of irony in discussing this sacred space from a 21st century Jewish perspective. Firstly, Goldhill points out, that while the Western Wall is truly impressive for the size of its stones and its antiquity, few people who visit it actually know what they are looking at (*Jerusalem* 64). Historians claim that it is the western retaining wall of Herod's temenos whereas Jewish tradition has evolved in teaching that it is the actual Western Wall of the Second Temple that had touched the Holy of Holies and therefore the permanent location of the *Shechinah*, the Divine presence. Still, many visitors don't have any perception as to what they are seeing. They come to see a tourist attraction known as a holy wall; without historical, cultural or religious connection it has no meaning to them. This highlights another point that Tweed makes, which is

that religious space becomes so when the observer has had “imaginatively figured” ideas or “sensually encountered” experiences with it (Tweed 119).

It is also ironic that this sacred space has become a source of tension between Jewish Orthodoxy and religious pluralism, as evidenced by the Women of the Wall movement. These women seek to “attain social and legal recognition of [their] right, as women, to wear prayer shawls, pray, and read from the Torah, collectively and aloud, at the Western Wall.” Expressing prayer this way is ritually important and meaningful to them. However, their expectation contradicts Orthodox interpretation of Jewish law. Notably, the fact that this has not yet been permitted indicates the power that Jewish Orthodoxy has not only over the administration of the Wall, but also the influence it has over the Israeli government to change these restrictions. Still, the Rabbinate and the Women of the Wall each venerate this sacred space and wish to find religious experience through the practice of prayer. While their approaches are different, the basic power of the Wall’s attraction stands and this is unifying.

How, then, does mundane space become sacred? I have shown that prayer has taken a physical place, a simple wall, and transformed it into a deeply holy space on earth, an *axis mundi*. The Western Wall evolved from being a retaining wall to becoming the most sacred space for Jews because of the meaning it holds in collective Jewish memory as well as the pilgrimages and prayers it received over the years. Additionally, as Tweed points out, “political, cultural and economic” forces have impacted this religious space to give it the symbolism and meaning it has today (121). Tweed also says that sacred space changes over time. Meir Ben-Dov describes this well. He sees the Wall as having reached its peak in Second Temple times and was then downgraded under Roman and Byzantine empires who sought to minimize the importance of the Temple based on Christian doctrine. The Wall was then revived under Moslem rule, as it

became a focal point again, although to a lesser degree than in the Second Temple times (56).

Politics has followed the Western Wall since its inception and even today it is a source of tension between Israeli and Arabs. Yet the Wall is also a religious space of universal attraction as it draws people of all faiths based on religious doctrine or historical interest. In answer to the question posed at the outset, if one wanted to describe the Western Wall today, it is simply a religious, national, cultural and political phenomenon.

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