

EQUESTRIAN ORDER
OF THE
HOLY SEPULCHRE OF JERUSALEM
Rome Section

**“JERUSALEM
AS THE UNIVERSAL MOTHERLAND”**

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Conference of Cardinal Gianfranco RAVASI

“Jerusalem as the universal motherland”

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I have been given a very precise theme, from which I would like to develop my reflection on Jerusalem, the holy city, the centre, point of reference, a place that cannot be discounted as a religious and literary seat. The text that we are examining here is a very short part of a hymn that is part of that famous collection of elements known as the Psalter, or the 150 songs or psalms of Israel.

We are dealing with Psalm 87 (86 in the Liturgy), one of the so-called “Hymns of Zion or to Zion.” It is precisely by beginning with these few verses that I would like to construct an ideal map of the Holy City of Jerusalem; obviously not a topographical map, but a theological and spiritual one and, in a certain sense, a cultural map as well.

The three stones of Zion

Talking about a map, four cardinal points have been chosen in advance. I shall begin immediately with the first, inferring it precisely from the *incipit* of this hymn. *He, Adonai, loves the city,* – the Psalm begins – *founded on holy mountains.* Hence, at the beginning, we see the representation of the holy mountains, a foundation of

stability. The mountains, the rock, the cliff, are symbols that are uninterruptedly applied to God beginning precisely from Jerusalem, a city situated 800 meters above sea level on an arid hill, so much so that one of the hypothetical philological interpretations of the Hebrew word *Sijjon* is that of a place that is rocky, hence dry and arid. Therefore, the stone is fundamental as the first cardinal point of Jerusalem because the three great religions and cultures that meet, interweave and even come into conflict in this city are all founded upon a rock.

Let us therefore start with the foundation stone of Judaism, the stone that the Hebrews call *kótel*, or the wall *par excellence*, which is traditionally called the “Wailing Wall”. We must keep in mind, however, that this stone is in actuality the end point of a whole “itinerary” of stones that were placed there. In fact, archaeologists have tried to reconstruct them genealogically: one sees clearly that those squared rocks are in the Herodian style because they were part of the temple that Herod built so sumptuously, the same Temple that Jesus would have frequented. Those stones are recognizable because of the fact that Herodian rocks usually are marked by a type of working or band that frontally marks the rectangle of the stone. There, one could say, was the seat of the temple of Zion, that is the heart of Judaism, a heart that was always loved, continuously exalted, perennially celebrated and considered as the pole star, not only of spirituality, but also of Jewish existence itself. One could say that from here begins a song that passes through the centuries, beginning from those Biblical psalms that speak of that particular stone, the Temple.

At this point I would like to cite an expression that seems very symbolic to me: I will take it from Psalm 102, verse 15: *Its stones are dear to your servants*, which in the original Hebrew expression is much more meaningful than the translations, as very often happens. Indeed, Cervantes was right when he said that every translation is like the underside of a tapestry, or Mounin in his essay on translation, *La Belle Infidèle* (Beautiful, but unfaithful). The Hebrew text reads: *Ki ratsû 'abdeka 'et-'abaneha*. The fundamental element is in the word *ratsû*, that is, the stones of Zion,

its stones “are dear”. In Hebrew, however, *ratsû*, is a derivative of the verb *ratsah*, that indicates a type of pleasure that is almost physical, a passionate communion, therefore, almost as if you were kissing that cold stone as if it were your wife. This is, therefore, a verb that indicates pleasure – semi-erotic pleasure, we might say – a word that has an instinctive, primordial connotation.

The second stone, as the Knights of the Holy Sepulchre and all the pilgrims know, is that of the Holy Sepulchre, which has as its heart and soul the overturned stone of Christ’s tomb, the sign of death but at the same time of victory over death. In the Book of Proverbs it says that *sheol* – a Hebrew word designating the netherworld – is like an ever open mouth that continuously swallows the dead. Christianity, however, states that this inexorable cycle has been interrupted because the stone of the sepulchre has been overturned in celebration of life. And that paschal celebration is entrusted to that great basilica in Jerusalem which, as you know, has a particularly tormented blueprint. Indeed, like always, around the stones we also find moving bodies which transform the material building into living stones. Beginning with the Empress Helena onwards, little by little until the time of the Crusades, the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre took on many different dimensions. For this reason it is noteworthy that the Orthodox do not refer to it as the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre – that would be an evocation of a dead stone, or at least one that is apparently dead – but rather the Basilica of the *Anástasis*”, that is, the Resurrection, which in Arabic is *Qiyāma*, which means “arise, climb, rise up” towards the heights and the infinity of God.

Thus we arrive at the third stone on which is founded the third religion and, at the same time, the third culture that has its homeland in Jerusalem: we are speaking of the so-called ‘*Qubbet as-Sakhra*’, that is, “The Dome of the Rock”, which is also commonly called the Mosque of Omar. The latter is an erroneous appellation because it is neither a mosque nor was it Omar who defined it as such. In its present state we see that at its centre there is a rock – hence the Dome of the Rock – and the

spirituality of Islam has one of its roots on it. In fact, they tell how it is from there that the prophet Mohammed ascended into heaven on his winged beast of burden, entering therefore into communion with God. Therefore, in this place too it is easy to find a dimension of eternity and the infinite that has its origin and seed precisely in a stone.

Therefore, this is the first cardinal point that I wanted to mention, beginning with the verses: *Jerusalem is founded on holy mountains, the soul of Jerusalem is founded on rock*, on three rocks that are the uninterrupted goal of multitudes of pilgrims and visitors. They represent the great knots that hold together the diversity of the professions of faith and the multiplicity of people who come up to Zion.

“The city of God”

The second element and the second cardinal point can be found in the next two verses (vv. 2-3) of the Psalm which contain the following: *The Lord loves the gates of Zion more than any dwelling in Jacob*, or better than all the houses, all the cities of the Holy Land. Furthermore: *Glorious things are said of you, 'ir 'elohîm, O city of God--* which could be translated as “divine city”. The psalm speaks of, among other things, the *gates of Zion*, but here the word *gates* is obviously a metaphor representing the totality, or rather the gates and everything that is located within them. When Christ says: *I am the gate for the sheep*, in a certain sense he was referring to the gate of the Temple, almost as if to say *I am the new Temple*. Let us recall, among other things, that the word *Babylon* – *Babilu* in Akkadian – has assumed a generic meaning on the basis of a popular etymology as a place of confusion, playing on the similarity of sound with the Hebrew verb *balal*, which means “to confuse”. If truth be told, in the Akkadian language, the name *bab ilu* means something quite different; *bab* is the gate, as it is in Arabic, and *ilu, il, el,*

'elohîm is God. Therefore, the true meaning is “gate of God”, hence the “city of God”, *'ir 'elohîm*.

This term is typically used to exalt a glorious, holy city. And here we have our second point, the city, not only the Temple *per sé* but the whole city that contains the Temple, one might say, in its womb. And it goes even farther, stating that the Most High keeps it safe and makes it compact. Here we have another component that I would like to mention. There is a theology related to the city of Zion, a theology that paradoxically was later studied in a very sophisticated way by cultural anthropology, but is already present, for example, in Psalm 46. Therefore, the idea was conceived and perceived by Israel. One of the basic texts of the famous scholar of the history of religions, Mircea Eliade, states that primitive man organized space through the establishment of a centre, or rather as a pivot around which the whole being revolves. So, in its ancient origins humanity places at the centre – even with the development of culture – the area of the Temple and the palace, that is the Temple and the royal palace. This is a matter of the heart that holds together not only the city, but the whole world, which without them would disintegrate. In fact, Psalm 46 presents us with a world that is collapsing in a kind of “de-creation. The only part that remains sound, however, is, Jerusalem, founded upon a rock, as was said before. And this is all due to the two presences: that of God within the Temple and, therefore, in the space and the presence of the divinity in the Temple and, throughout history through the royal palace, the dwelling of the dynasty of David. It constitutes the vertical sequence, a diachronic throughout the centuries and later will also represent the Messianic dimension. Therefore, Jerusalem becomes the womb of this twofold divine presence around which we revolve.

At this point I would like to make mention of a very beautiful Rabbinical aphorism that describes such a universe organized around a centre, and it does so with poetic originality inspired by the structure of the eye. The world, it says, is like

an eye: the sea is the white of the eye, the earth the iris and Jerusalem the pupil, while the image reflected in it is the Temple.

The universal map of Zion

Tackling the third cardinal point of our reflection, we enter into the basic theme itself for which, however, it was necessary to prepare first by illustrating a few basic points. We are speaking of universalism. If it is true that Zion has within it the Temple, therefore a spatial and historical presence, it is the heart, the centre of the world, and it is clear that all peoples, or rather the whole geopolitical map, has to converge there. And here we have the words of the Jewish poet who composes poetry passing over in a sort of topography of special significance, although it probably says little or nothing to the western reader. Pay attention to the names now, because they constitute a sequence: *'I number Rahab and Babylon among those that acknowledge me; look at Tyre, Philistia, Ethiopia, so and so was born there.'* (v. 4). What does all this mean? Let us leave aside the last phrase for now, and we will come back to it later when we look at this map. First of all, Rahab, who became a sea monster within the tradition of Biblical mythology, but was also the term to define Egypt, the superpower of the West at that time. And then, right after, the word *Babel*, Babylon, which was the Eastern superpower. Hence, the West on one side, the East on the other. Next we turn to the centre, an area which the poet calls Philistea, *Pelishtim*, that is, Palestine, a word that comes from the transcription of the term "Philistine". Then he proceeds to mention *Sūr*, the city of Tyre, that is in Phoenicia and represents the North. Last of all, there is *Cush*, that is Ethiopia, which is the South.

Five place names were chosen to construct the planetary map of that time as if to say that, in the end, all were born in Jerusalem and in this city they have their source. To put it in other words, the Hebrew poet recalls that these great powers that demanded respect and fear – the west and the east, the commerce of Tyre and, last of

all, the place that furnished the natural resources, that is Ethiopia, that is all these important countries, all these strong and powerful people converge on Zion, or rather they are supported by a heart that is the Holy City, the city of God, Jerusalem.

This theme will be developed in a wonderful canticle, the work of the prophet considered as a kind of Dante of Hebrew literature, that is, Isaiah. It is precisely in chapter 2 of his book that this great prophet imagines that over the whole earth there is a kind dark blanket, a shroud of darkness. Only a mountain is illuminated, almost as if it were a kind of great axis. And behold, all the people of the earth begin to move towards this cardinal point. From that city, Zion, the Word of God personified comes out. It goes out to meet the people who are coming from every place and, once they have arrived in Jerusalem – and this is the great intuition of the *shalom*, of the Messianic peace – they drop their swords and lances that will be transformed into ploughs and pruning hooks to work the earth and produce fruit. Thus war will end forever and peace will reign as an instrument of wellbeing among the peoples who will now hold hands. And, as a seal, Isaiah launches a final appeal to the house of Jacob that it does not lag behind in this great process of the peoples.

A wonderful vision, indie, but as I head toward the fourth and final cardinal point, I would like to recall that in this representation, understanding that within it is not only Jerusalem with its Temple, but also the entire cosmos, there is the possibility of another divine epiphany, of a theophany. God, in fact, does not present himself only in Jerusalem where, as we read in 1 Kings 8, in the prayer for the consecration of the Temple, *shemî sham*, or, “there is my name”, there is my presence. There’s something more: the whole universe becomes the Temple, and this idea is based on the fact that Jerusalem sanctifies and consecrates the whole space. Psalm 148 is especially significant in presenting a choral *Alleluia*, a verb form of the Hebrew imperative, *’hallelû-Jah*, which means “praise the Lord”. A choral alleluia that is intoned by twenty-two or twenty-three creatures. One might expect to find here twenty-one, that is three times seven, since seven is the number of fullness. Why,

then, twenty-two (or twenty-three because of a repetition). Here the response is, for certain verses, downright striking: twenty-two or twenty-three represent the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Therefore, all the realities that are named with the alphabet constitute ideally a praise of God. And man is great within creation. A most beautiful Psalm, the 148th, with its simple recourse to listing that becomes a way of exalting the universal cosmic Temple. *The heavens declare the glory of God; the sky proclaims its builder's craft*, as Psalm 19 proclaims, *One day to the next conveys that message; one night to the next imparts that knowledge..* Here, too there is a type of cosmic revelation that is associated with the revelation that resounds in Zion through the *Torah*.

The medieval cabalistic tradition, for its part, developed this reflection, seeking to resolve the famous antinomy between the infinite and space. God is infinite by definition, but the cosmos that we consider infinite does not participate fully in God's infinity because God is beyond the cosmos itself. There is a medieval cabalistic hymn, the main strophe of which I would like to read, that goes beyond Zion, beyond the universal cosmic Temple and tries to confront this mystery, leaving it suspended through a play of words in Hebrew. *Maqom* in Hebrew means "place", and usually it is the place *par excellence*, the holy place, that is, the Temple. The medieval hymn says: *wehû hammaqôm shel maqôm we'en lammaqôm meqomô*, which means: "He is the place" (*wehû hammaqôm*). God is the place that absorbs all places. But the hymn immediately adds *shel maqôm*, the place "of every place", and *we'en lammaqôm meqomô*, which means "this place does not have places". The intuition is in conceiving of God as the "place" *par excellence*, that contains and consecrates all places but, being infinite, God is not a "place".

"Within you is my true home!"

And now we have arrived at the last cardinal point, which is also the conclusion of our whole discourse. As we can see, we have moved continuously around a series of elements that are interconnected: the Temple, the city, the universe that is completely compact. We know, however, that Zion is, yes, a Temple, therefore a space that is expressed through architecture, a global city, but it is also a living presence that is not only the presence of God. Men and women are also a living presence, and therefore the Psalm wonders about humanity, or rather its “citizens of the world”, to indicate an authentic universalism. In fact, if it is true that Jerusalem is the heart, the centre that holds everything together, being citizens of Jerusalem also means being citizens of the world.

So, then, the words of the poet who lists Rahab, Babylon, Philistea, Tyre, Ethiopia. *"This one was born there." But of Zion it must be said: "They all were born here."* And still: *the Lord notes in the register of the peoples: "This one was born here."* As you can see, there is a marked repetition, which in Hebrew would sound like this: *jullad sham / jullad bah*, “There and in it we were all born”. It is truly a very suggestive image of God seen almost like the “mayor” of the universal city of Jerusalem, who seems to have in front of him the registry, the book in which he registers all the peoples of the earth, not only the Hebrews, but the people of *Cush*, that is the Ethiopians, even the dreaded *Babel*, because all were born there in Sion. Their land is headquartered there. And this, I would say, is the last coordinate of the extraordinary interpretation of Jerusalem that comes from Psalm 87.

Therefore, even if there is little probability of its succeeding politically, Jerusalem, should become once again an international city, not belonging exclusively to a single people because this is, in a certain sense, basic to a theology of Zion. It is the city in which everyone must feel they have citizenship, in which all should find their residence; in Zion everyone has a kind of natural citizenship even though each one has his or her own culture. We should not forget that, in many ways, throughout its history, Jerusalem has long been a reference point and a place of welcome where

the most various peoples converged, and ideally rediscovered their identity there. In Jerusalem, taking into consideration the various liturgies celebrated there and the diverse cultural components that the city embraces, one can note the use of at least twelve different alphabets. Therefore, in this case too Jerusalem would represent the vital convergence of all the peoples who find their matrix in the spirituality of this city.

As a kind of seal on the journey I have proposed, I would like to conclude with a reflection on the fact that Christianity has a progressive tendency to relativise the space of Jerusalem, especially in that fundamental area of the Temple. In fact, Christianity is beginning to understand that, if we want to discover the true soul of Jerusalem, it can no longer be reduced to a pure and simple space and to the possession of a plot of land, as unfortunately is happening again in our day. And here one naturally thinks of the subdivision of the Holy Sepulchre into portions because of the presence of each Christian confession. But what is more important is to succeed in making that space alive, of making it the life-giving presence of a transcendent reality without abstraction, as the very figure of Christ demonstrates. As we find in the Gospels, Christ loved and frequented the Temple of Herod. However, in the famous Prologue of John's Gospel – and this is an element that is not immediately evident within the Greek text – it says that the Word, or rather the eternal and infinite *Logos*, *pitched his tent among us* (1:14). Here it indicates the tent of flesh, that is the Word became flesh and pitched his tent in our midst. And the tent *par excellence* is the Temple that, in the Christian view, is made of flesh, that is, a person who bears within himself the supreme presence of the divine, namely Jesus Christ. The Temple, in a certain sense, is relativised. Christ himself says that it will be destroyed and in only three days he will raise it up. John notes, obviously, that Jesus was speaking of his body which would be raised, overcoming death. However, the Greek text of John 1:14 uses the verb *skenoún* and the expression *skené* indicates the tent, therefore *eskénosen* strictly speaking means “pitched his tent” among us. One could actually

find a certain assonance with the fundamental word with which the Hebrews defined God's presence within the: the *shekinà*, where we find the radicals *s-k-n* corresponding to the Greek ζ, *sigma*, κ, *kappa* e ν, *ni* of *skené*, "the tent". In Hebrew, however: *shin*, *kaf*, *nun*. The same consonants, the same radicals for assonance, although differing semantically, one meaning "presence", the other "tent". John's Prologue thus affirms that the Temple has become the person of Christ. And Jesus himself will say to the Samaritan woman at the well, "Believe me, woman, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem....But the hour is coming, and is now here, when true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth" (John 4: 21-23).

Behold, once again we see the need to transfer and transform those stones with which we began, or rather that concrete city, into a symbol, a sign that represents God himself in our midst, that is the Incarnation. Here I would like to recall the impressive and grandiose final scene of the Book of Revelations. The apostle John sees a new and perfect Jerusalem, now become a heavenly city. He looks at it and sees a surprising reality: "I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God almighty and the Lamb." (21:22). But above and beyond this suggestive symbolic image of Zion, Jerusalem must once again become a concrete sign to be kept, it must be first and foremost a sign of a humanity that recognizes God's presence within itself. Therefore, Jerusalem is our homeland, not like the country in which we were born, but the place of our deep spiritual origins, as Psalm 87: "*Within you is my true home.*"

Once when I was young, I was taking part in the archaeological excavations in the Middle East, and I had the opportunity to hear a Scottish archaeologist who had participated in the excavation of the Hill of Ophel, where the City of David had been located. The objective of that excavation was to find any remains of Solomon's Temple. The archaeologist told me a curious fact: his parents were farmers and had never even been to London, except maybe when they were first married. On Sunday,

however, when they went to the Presbyterian Temple to sing hymns, when they sang the Psalms of Zion, they did so with such joy and love as if they knew the city of Zion very well, almost as if it were their homeland, precisely because they had understood that Jerusalem was not simple some geographic place, but had become a symbol. And here, according to this strong symbolism, Jerusalem remains a great sign of the history of humanity, in its joys and sorrows, and therefore it is, yes, glorious, but also striped with blood.

I would like, then, to conclude drawing once again on the Hebrew tradition, on the basis of a rabbinical text. God is creating the world, and the angels gather around. On a tray the first angel is holding ten portions of beauty, that is, the beauty of the universe. God takes nine portions of the beauty and assigns them to Jerusalem, while a single portion of beauty is destined for the rest of the world. The second angel holds a tray with ten portions of wisdom and knowledge. God takes nine portions of wisdom and gives them to Jerusalem, which is the land *par excellence* of the voice of the prophets, giving only one portion to the rest of the world. And so on. Until the last angel comes, he is gloomy-looking, dressed in dark clothing, and he too holds a tray holding ten portions of sorrow, suffering, lamentation and tears. And in this case one would probably expect a turnabout of the nine to one ratio. However, the Rabbinic text says that God gave nine portions of suffering to Jerusalem and only one to the rest of the world, precisely because Jerusalem must in every situation represent the full breath of humanity.