

The Tract about the Places and Condition of the Holy Land

*This treatise, which provides a wide-ranging description of the Holy Land and its peoples, was written in the years immediately preceding the Battle of Hattin in 1187, and probably between 1168 and 1176, after the foundation of the Archbishopric of Petra and the Bishopric of Hebron, and before Nablus (which the tract records as being in the hands of the king) was enfeoffed to Balian of Ibelin, on his marriage to the dowager queen Maria Comnena. It would appear that the reference to the coronation of King Leo of Armenia (which took place in 1198) is a later insertion, and in addition one of the later manuscripts contains two longer insertions concerning the Teutonic Knights and the Assassins. The tract was used by a number of later writers, including the German pilgrim Thietmar in his account of his visit to the Holy Land in 1217, and by Jacques de Vitry, Bishop of Acre 1216-28, in his History of Jerusalem. Parts of the text survive in quite a few manuscripts, and full (or fuller) versions in five thirteenth-century, and two fifteenth-century, manuscripts. The Latin text is edited by Benjamin Z. Kedar, 'The Tractatus de locis et statu sancta terre', in *The Crusades and their Sources. Essays Presented to Bernard Hamilton*, ed. J. France and W.G. Zajac (Aldershot 1998), pp. 123-31 [discussion *ibid.*, pp. 111-22]. [Translation © G.A. Loud (2004)]*

About the Site of the Land of Jerusalem and its Inhabitants

The land of Jerusalem is situated in the centre of the world. It is for the most part mountainous, but the land is extremely fertile. To the east of it lies Arabia, to the south Egypt, to the west is the Great Sea, and to the north Syria. From ancient times it has been the common homeland of the nations, since they have flocked there from every part to worship at the holy places, as can be read in the Acts of the Apostles about the gift of the Holy Spirit [to] 'the Parthians, the Medes and the Elamites', and others.¹ Now, however, these are the peoples who are located in it and have their homes and places of worship there. Some of these are Christians, and others are non-Christians. There are various Christian peoples who are divided into various sects.

About the Franks: Of these the first are the Franks, who are more properly called Latins. [They are] warlike men, practised in arms, have their heads uncovered, and alone among all these peoples they shave their beards. All who use the Latin

¹ *Acts*, ii.9.

language and are obedient to the Roman Church are called Latins. They alone are Catholics.

About the Greeks: Others are the Greeks, separated from the Roman Church, cunning men but with limited skill at arms, who wear tall hats, erring in the Faith and in the articles of the law, especially in that they say that the Holy Spirit proceeds not from the Father and the Son but only from the Father, and that they sacrifice only with leavened bread. They [also] are in error about many other matters. They have their own language.

About the Syrians: Others are the Syrians, unused to arms, for the most part cultivating beards, but not like the Greeks, for they trim them a little. Their worship is in between that of the Latins and Greeks, and everywhere subject [to them]; however they agree with the Greeks in the faith and sacraments. They use the Arabic language in ordinary life, but the Greek in spiritual matters.

About the Armenians: Others are the Armenians, to some extent practised in arms, disagreeing with both Latins and Greeks on many issues, undertaking their Lenten fast at the time of the nativity of Christ and celebrating the nativity of Christ on the day of the visitation, and differing on many other ecclesiastical issues. They have their own language. Between the Armenians and Greeks there is implacable hate. The Armenians have recently promised to obey the Roman Church, when their king received a crown in the presence of the Archbishop of Mainz, the legate of the Roman See.

About the Georgians: Others are the Georgians, who honour St. George with solemn pomp. They are well-versed in arms, grow their beards and hair very long, and wear hats one cubit high. Both lay people and clerics have tonsures as though they were clerics; those of the clerics round while those of the lay are square. They make sacrifice with leavened bread, and imitate the Greeks in nearly everything. They have their own language.

About the Jacobites: Others are the Jacobites or Jacobitesses, who take their name from a certain Jacob, who have fallen into the heresy of the Nestorians, believing in very bad things. They use the Chaldean language.²

About the Nestorians: Others are the Nestorians, who are heretical in faith, claiming that the Blessed Mary was the mother of [someone who was] just a man, and erring in many other matters. They use the Chaldean language.

About the Latins: The Latins are also divided into various peoples: Germans, Spanish, French, Italians and other races who share Europe. There are three peoples from Italy in the land of Jerusalem, who are of great use and profit to that land: the Pisans, Genoese and the Venetians. They are skilled in naval affairs, invincible upon the sea, and well practised in all forms of warfare, and wise in matters of trade, and free from all tributes and renders, exempt from the jurisdiction of all judges, claiming rights of self-government. They are however envious and quarrelsome, which gives greater security to the Saracens.

About the Temple and Hospital. There are also two houses of religion in the land of Jerusalem, the Temple and Hospital, overflowing with great wealth, collecting renders from the whole of Europe, and having great incomes and possessions in this land of promise. When the Cross of the Lord is taken into battle, they then take their station by it, the Templars to the right, the Hospitallers to the left. The Templars are indeed outstanding knights. They wear white surcoats with a red cross. A two-colour banner which is called the *Balcanum* leads them into battle. They go to battle in an orderly manner and without shouting. They are the first into action and seek out the fiercest among the enemy; they are the first to advance and the last to retreat, and they await the order of their Master. When however they judge the moment is right for battle, at the order to charge the noise of the trumpet sounds, and the Psalm, ‘not for us, not for us, but in Your name give glory, O Lord’,³ is chanted with devotion, and lowering their lances they charge the enemy. Manfully seeking out both the advance guard and the thick of the battle, they never dream of giving way, and either break the enemy completely or perish. In a retreat they form the rearguard, sending the rest of the

² i.e. Syriac.

³ *Psalm*, cxiii.9 (Vulgate)

troops ahead of them, to whom they give complete care and protection. If any among them for any reason turns tail, or behaves less than bravely, or takes up arms against [other] Christians, he is made subject to harsh punishment. The white surcoat with its cross which is the badge of their knighthood is ignominiously torn off him and he is cast out of their fellowship. He shall eat on the ground without a cloth for one year, and if the dogs should worry him, he is forbidden to complain. If after one year the Master and his brothers shall judge him to have rendered condign satisfaction, he shall be restored to his original full knightly status and reputation. These Templars are directed to the observance of a strict religious way of life, obeying humbly, without private property, eating and being clad sparingly, and living outside all the time in tents.

The Hospitallers however wear a white cross on their surcoats. They are good knights, and along with their warlike activities they take care of the poor and sick. They have their own observance and discipline.

About the Germans. The German knights also have a house in Acre. They are wise men, skilled in warfare, fearless in battle, and observe the Epistle of Paul in every matter. They were at loggerheads with the Hospitallers who sought to seize their property, and so they went to the Templars, asking them for their support, in return for which they would be subject to their authority. When they thus became subject to the Templars, the latter came and took away their badge, a circle around a black cross, which they had worn up to that point, and which was held in great honour by everyone. They also take care of the sick and provide everything that they need.⁴

About the Patriarch and the bishops. First of all, this land of Jerusalem has a patriarch, who is the father of the Faith and of the Christians and the vicar of Jesus Christ. This patriarch has four archbishops: one in the province of Palestine, namely Caesarea; another in the province of Phoenicia, namely Tyre; a third in the province of Galilee, namely Nazareth; and the fourth in the province of the Moabites, that is Petra or Montreal. The Archbishop of Caesarea has one suffragan, the Bishop of Sebastea (where John the Baptist, and the prophets Elisha and Abdias are buried). The

⁴ This section is a later interpolation, found only in Munich, Clm 5307. The Knights of St. Mary of the Teutons, or the Teutonic Knights, were originally a charitable order founded during the siege of Acre in 1190, and became a military monastic order only in 1197/8. The incident referred to occurred in 1191, soon after the original foundation. Although the Teutonic Knights became a completely independent order, they continued to follow the Templar rule.

Archbishop of Tyre has four suffragans, at Acre, Sidon, Beirut and Banyas (which is Caesarea Philippi). The Archbishop of Nazareth has one suffragan, the Bishop of Tiberias. The Archbishop of Petra has no Latin suffragan, but he does have one Greek, on Mount Sinai. The lord Patriarch has the following bishops directly subject to him: those of Bethlehem, Lydda and Hebron (where Adam and Eve, and the three patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are buried).

About the religious houses. In the church of the Lord's sepulchre are canons of St. Augustine. They have a prior, but promise obedience to the Patriarch alone. In the Temple of the Lord are an abbot and canons regular. It should be made clear that the Temple of the Lord is one institution and the knightly Temple another: the former are clerics, the latter knights. In the church of Mount Sion are an abbot and canons regular. In the church of the valley of Josaphat are an abbot and black monks. All these abbots are mitred and assist the Patriarch and the aforementioned bishops in their ministry.⁵

The cities which do not have bishops. Furthermore, these are the cities which do not have bishops: Ascalon, which is under Bethlehem; Jaffa, which is under the canons of the Lord's sepulchre; Nablus, which is subject to the Abbot of the Temple, and Haifa, which is subject to the Archbishop of Caesarea.

Although this land of Jerusalem is throughout holy and solemn, for it was where the prophets and Apostles, and the Lord himself, lived, there are however within it certain places which men hold in veneration before all others. We shall briefly outline their merits and names.

About various places: Nazareth in which the Blessed Virgin and Mother of Christ was born. There indeed, after being announced by an angel, the son of the Most High descended into a virgin womb. Bethlehem, in which the celestial bread was born,

⁵ Augustinian canons were installed at the Holy Sepulchre in 1114. The other three houses all claimed to have been founded by Godfrey of Bouillon, and in the first two cases this may have been correct, although the Augustinian canons at the Temple of the Lord (the Dome of the Rock) were probably introduced later. St. Mary of Josaphat (built over what was believed to be the tomb of the Virgin Mary) may only have been founded in 1112. It was closely linked to the royal house. Abbot Gilduin, appointed in 1120, was a cousin of Baldwin II, and the latter's wife Queen Morphia and their daughter Queen Melisende were both buried there. The abbeys of Josaphat and Mount Sion were both destroyed by the Muslims after 1187.

and where the Magi who were guided by a star brought gifts. There the Latin interpreter Jerome lies. The [River] Jordan in which our Saviour was baptised and took bodily form for human salvation, where the Holy Spirit was seen in the form of a dove, and where the voice of the Father was heard. The place of fasting that is called Quarentena, in which Christ fasted for forty days and instituted the Lenten observance, and where He was tempted by the Devil. The pool of Genesareth around which he spent a great deal of time, worked many miracles and where He summoned the disciples. Mount Tabor in which He was transfigured, appearing in front of three disciples along with Moses and Elisha. In Jerusalem there are many venerable places such as the Temple of the Lord where he was presented, and from which he ejected those who were buying and selling, and from whence James the brother of the Lord was thrown off. Mount Sion on which he celebrated the Supper with his disciples and instituted the New Testament, and where the Holy Spirit visibly appeared above the Apostles, and where also the Virgin Mother of the Lord passed away. Calvary, where for our sake he received his death on the cross. The Sepulchre in which His body was placed, and from which he rose again. The Mount of Olives where He was greeted with honour by the boys while he was seated on an ass, and from whence He miraculously ascended into Heaven. Bethany where he raised Lazarus and Siloam where he gave light to the man who had been born blind. The valley of Josaphat, which is called Gethsemane, where He was arrested by the Jews and where the Virgin Mary is buried. Sebastea where John the Baptist, Elisha and Abdias were buried. Hebron where Adam and Eve and the three patriarchs were buried. The church of St. Stephen, where he was stoned. As is fully recorded in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, there is no mountain nor valley, no plain, river, spring nor pool that has not been visited by the miracles of the prophets, apostles or of Christ himself. The spring of Jacob in Samaria changes colour four times a year, to be muddy, blood red, green and clear. The spring of Siloam does not flow all the time, but only three days a week. The Asphalt Lake is in the land of Jerusalem, on the border between Arabia and Palestine. There were once five cities there which were drowned because of the sins of their citizens. Nothing which has a soul can sink in this lake. When the Emperor Vespasian heard this, he had seven men who could not swim thrown into the lake with their hands and feet tied. They remained thereon for

three days and did not perish. ⁶ There are trees around this lake bearing most beautiful fruit which when it is picked stinks and then speedily dissolves into ashes.

About the mountains. The principal mountains in the land of Jerusalem are Lebanon, Mount Tabor, Hermons, Gilboa and Carmel. Mount Lebanon is the highest of all and overlooks Syria from Phoenicia, and it has very tall cedars, but these are not as abundant as they were in the past. Some people allege that it never rains on Mount Gilboa as the result of David's curse, but this is false.

About the animals. There are many animals in this land, but in addition to the common animals of our lands there are there [also] lions, leopards, bears, different types of deer, wild goats, and a certain most savage animal which they call a lynx, from whose savagery no animal can be safe and which, so they say, frightens lions. Moreover there are hyenas, which they call wild dogs, which are fiercer than wolves. There are here [also] a great many camels and buffalos.

About the trees. There are many trees here and they are of almost every variety that grows on the earth. But as well as the common trees which we have in Europe there are palms here, full of the fruits which are called dates. There are trees here which they call 'trees of paradise', having leaves a cubit long and half a cubit wide, growing long apples, and on one bough there are a hundred fruits that have a honeyed taste. There are also lemon trees whose fruit is acid. There are also trees here that bring forth apples called 'Adam's apples', on which apples the bite of Adam appears most clearly. There are also canes here, from which a most sweet sap flows; they are called *canimellae* and sugar comes from them. There are also shrubs here which are sown like wheat, from which silk is collected. Once indeed the balsam tree was not [to be found] anywhere in the world, except in the land of Jerusalem, at the place called Jericho. Then the Egyptians came and carried that tree to Egypt and planted it in their city of Babylon ⁷ and there alone they exist. There is also something miraculous about these trees today, for if they are cultivated by anybody other than Christians they bear no fruit but are condemned to perpetual sterility. There are cedar trees here which bear a giant fruit like a man's head, but a little elongated, and this fruit has three [distinct] tastes,

⁶ This story about Vespasian and the Dead Sea was taken from Bede's tract on the Holy Places.

⁷ i.e. Cairo.

one in the skin, another inside the skin, and the third in its inner pith. It should be known that the cedar tree is very tall and sterile. The coastal cedar is small and fruitful. There is also here the fig of Pharaoh, which does not bear its fruit among its leaves as do other trees but on its trunk.

About the changes in the names of cities. The names of towns and of other places have been changed somewhat because of changes in the peoples who have at various times lived in this land. Therefore I shall list both the old and the modern names for various of the towns. Jerusalem was first of all Jebus, then Salem, and thereafter, from both Jebus and Salem, Jerusalem. Then it was [named] Elya, after Elyus, a Roman Quaestor who rebuilt it in the place where it now is after the destruction carried out by Titus.⁸ Hebron was first [called] Arbe, then Cariathiarim, thereafter Hebron, and finally St. Abraham, since he was buried there. In the same way what was Lydda is now called St. George. Jaffa has always been called by that name. Caesarea was first Dor, then ‘the Tower of Strato’, and was finally called Caesarea, in honour of Caesar. Haifa was first Porphiria, and Acre first Tholomais. Tye has always been called this. It is a noble city in which there once reigned Agenor, from whom Dido was descended. Sidon is also called Sagitta. Sarepta is also known as Sarphent. Bethlehem was first called Effrata. The place which is now Nablus was first called Sychar. What is now Sebastea was first known as Samaria, and what is now Mahomeria was first Luzel and thereafter Bethel. What is now Belinas was first called Banyas and then Caesarea Philippi.

... **About the King of Jerusalem.** Moreover this same province of Jerusalem has a Latin king, who receives his crown and sceptre from the Patriarch, and whom all the nations which are in this land obey. He swears to defend the most Holy Sepulchre, to give judgement and justice among the peoples, and to preserve the customs of the land and its way of life. The barons of the whole land are subject to him, and march to war at his order, they are always ready to defend the land with the number of knights assigned to each one and to fight for the inheritance of Christ.

The Magnates of the land of Jerusalem. The principal barons of the land are these: the lord of Beirut, the lord of Sidon, the lord of Haifa, the lord of Caesarea, the

⁸ Jerusalem was laid waste by Titus, son of the Roman Emperor Vespasian, in 70 A.D. in punishment for a widespread Jewish revolt.

lord of Tiberias who is the Prince of Galilee, the Count of Jaffa and Ascalon, the lord of Montreal and of all the land of Oultrejordain, the lord of Ibelin, the lord of Arsuf and the lord of Bethsan. Jerusalem, Tyre, Acre and Nablus belong directly to the king, with no other lord. Moreover the Prince of Antioch and the Count of Tripoli, although there are outside the boundaries of the kingdom of Jerusalem, are considered to be the king's men and have sworn fealty to him. All these men have a fixed number of knights whom they are obliged to hold in permanent readiness with arms and horses, so as to resist the frequent incursions of the Saracens.

About those who are not Christians. Since we have described above the sects of the various Christians who dwell in the land of Jerusalem, now we ought to have a look at those who are not Christians and have their homes there.

About the Jews. The first of these are the Jews, obstinate men, weaker than women and everywhere slaves, suffering a flux of the blood every month. They observe the letter of the Old Testament and have the Hebrew language. Among them are the Sadducees who do not believe in the Resurrection.

About the Samaritans. Others are Samaritans, who like the Jews are feeble. They wear a round linen hat. Their worship resembles that of the Jews, but they differ greatly from them in their attitude, for they are cruel enemies one to another. They observe only the five books of Moses. They use a sort of Hebrew language, but not the whole of it, and in everyday life they speak Arabic. They are unhappy in the propagation of their race, for in the whole world there are less than a thousand of them; in fact only some three hundred can be found.

About the Assassins. Others are the Essenes, whom we popularly call the Assassins. They are derived from the Jews, but do not observe the Jewish rite in everything.⁹ They observe their superstition as religiously as the Templars do their law. They treat their leader as though he were a god and obey his commands to the death. When their prince, who is always called 'the Old Man' as though he were a man of

⁹ This deduction, based on the similarities of the names Assassin and Essene, and (probably) on knowledge of Josephus's 'Jewish War', is entirely mistaken. The Assassins were a radical Sh'ia Islamic group.

wisdom, wishes to kill some other prince, [then] in the midst of their knives he nominates whom he wishes to murder. Then each man rushes to the knives, and the one who is able to take one gives thanks to the prince and immediately leaves to kill the person who has been named. Anybody who is killed on this service is esteemed as though an angel. Their life is in common, and they do not have their own property. [A group] fewer than thirty cannot come to a decision. They have a master who is the head of their order and religion [and who lives] in far to the east; they are subject to him and obey him. The Saracens call him the ‘Lord of the knives’. They plot only against great men, and this only for some offence or [other] good reason. The killing of ordinary people is held by them to be a matter of the greatest shame. They have a language which is mixed Chaldean and Hebrew.

The aforesaid ‘Old Man’ recently had the son of the Prince of Antioch killed in the monastery of the Blessed Virgin in the city of Tortosa. As a result the Templars, the father of the murdered youth and the King of Armenia were much upset. They sent out an expedition which laid almost all the Assassins’ land waste. They violently destroyed everything except four castles.¹⁰ It is also recounted concerning this ‘Old Man’ that he will have kidnapped boys shut away in an underground chamber and has them fed on bread, water and vegetables until they reach their teens.¹¹ But after they have reached the years of discretion, they are brought into his garden, which is furnished with every amenity, and there they are entertained for some considerable time both with exquisite meals and by the company of most beautiful maidens. For they find all sorts of dishes in this garden and every sort of fruit, and the most beautiful young women who can be found throughout the region are shut up there, and made subject to the lust of these young men. The ‘Old Man’ then makes a speech to these young men, along these lines, that the underground chamber is hell, and that those who refuse to obey his orders will be made subject to such a punishment for all eternity; those who fulfil his wishes will remain for ever in paradise like the one there. And hence many are deceived, and so they are deprived both of their lives and their souls.¹²

About the Bedouins. Others are the Bedouins, wild men who are popularly called ‘country Turks’. They always live in the countryside, and have neither land nor

¹⁰ Another interpolation from the Munich manuscript: it refers to the murder of Raymond, eldest son of Bohemond IV, in 1213. The reprisals were, in fact, much less effective than the interpolator suggested.

¹¹ *usque ad iuventutem.*

¹² A similar legend was later recounted by Marco Polo in his ‘Travels’.

home. They are well endowed with flocks and all sorts of animals which are pastured, with permission, sometimes in the lands of the Christians and at others in those of the Saracens. The majority of them are split into tribes in different regions. They feed on meat and milk, are clad in the skins of sheep and goats, and always sleep in the open air, unless heavy rain is falling. They have tents made from animal skins. They are friends of fortune, for they help those whom they see to be the stronger, and are great traitors and remarkable thieves. They wear red hats with a cloth wound round them. When we prevail against the Saracens, then they are our brothers and friends. If however the Saracens prevail then they help them, and sell fleeing Christians to these Saracens (and similarly Saracens to the Christians). Their good faith is worthless unless fear compels it. Mohammed is alleged to have been one of them. They use the Saracen language, but in a very corrupt form.