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## **'Our Jerusalem': Bertha Spafford Vester and Christianity in Palestine during the British Mandate**

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# Britain, Palestine and Empire: The Mandate Years

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ASHGATE

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Chapter 3  
'Our Jerusalem': Bertha Spafford Vester and  
Christianity in Palestine during the  
British Mandate

Heleen Murre-van den Berg

For almost seventy years the American Colony has served Jerusalem. It has kept its doors open to all who came; housed the homeless, fed the hungry, cared for the ill. It has never taken sides in political or religious issues. From its beginning it has been the meeting place and refuge of Christian, Moslem, and Jew.<sup>1</sup>

Bertha Spafford Vester

Small among the Christian communities of the Holy Land, but large and long-lived when compared to many other Western Christian missionary initiatives,<sup>2</sup> the American Colony has made an extraordinary mark on the history of Jerusalem. Long known for its decidedly non-conversionist policy and ecumenical views, its extensive and often successful welfare activities, and its political and religious neutrality, recent studies have paid attention to some of the more ambiguous traits of the colony, notably its early millennialism, its decidedly American outlook, its class consciousness and its difficult separation from the Swedish members in the late 1920s.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bertha Spafford Vester, *Our Jerusalem: An American Family in the Holy City, 1881–1949* (Jerusalem, 1988), p. 357.

<sup>2</sup> According to Vester, in its heyday, between 1896 and the early 1920s, the Colony comprised about 130 people, including 40 children, *Our Jerusalem*, p. 189.

<sup>3</sup> The best general work is that of Helga Dudman and Ruth Kark, *The American Colony: Scenes from a Jerusalem Saga* (Jerusalem, 1998), paying ample attention also to the Swedish side of the story. It is based on a wide range of sources, including Swedish and Hebrew ones, and includes a good overview of earlier research. The work, however, is not referenced and the style is journalistic and descriptive, rather than analytic and source critical. For more critical work by Kark on the subject, see Ruth Kark, 'Sweden and the Holy Land: Pietistic and Communal Settlement', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 22/1 (1996): 46–7, and Yaakov Ariel and Ruth Kark, 'Messianism, Holiness, Charisma, and Community: The American-Swedish Colony in Jerusalem, 1911–1933', *Church History*, 65 (1996): 641–57. A recent study focuses on aspects of the American identity of the Colony, Millette Shamir, "'Our Jerusalem': Americans in the Holy Land and Protestant Narratives of National Entitlement", *American Quarterly*, 55/1 (2003): 29–60. The much-

Despite the considerable literature on the Colony, the subject has certainly not been exhausted. Whereas a comprehensive and contextual historical study begs to be written (which may further explore the wealth of archival sources, including the vast photographic collection), this contribution focuses on one particular topic, that of the American Colony's relationship to Palestinian Christianity. In many of the earlier studies, the original pre-millenarianism, closeness to Holiness movements, and geo-pietist motivations for living in the Holy Land, were important aspects of describing the Colony's position within Christianity.<sup>4</sup> In these, however, the relationship to other Christians in the Holy Land, especially to the autochthonous Christians, was largely ignored. In this chapter, the Colony's position in Christian Palestine will be the main theme, although its treatment needs to include a look at the Colony's position in Protestant Christianity, especially its presence in Palestine. The subject is approached through the eyes of Bertha Spafford Vester, the leader of the Colony for most of the mandatory era, and the author of one of the most popular versions of the Colony's history: *Our Jerusalem, An American Family in the Holy City, 1881–1949*. This implies a focus on the period of the British Mandate, a period that in earlier studies of the Colony's religious convictions tends to be glossed over all too quickly. The combination of the focus on the Mandate context and the Colony's views on the Palestinian Christians will sharpen the image of the Colony's persistent Protestant, colonial and mediating character.

Bertha Spafford Vester was born in 1878, a few years before her parents and a few of their circle left Chicago for the Holy Land in 1881. She grew up in the Holy Land, married a son of a German missionary, Ferdinand Vester, and after her mother's death in 1923 took over the leadership of the American Colony. It is Bertha Vester's own account of the story that is the main source of this chapter, a story that was written in the late 1940s. At that time, Vester was in her late sixties, the British were leaving Palestine and 'sniper bullets at intervals struck the outer walls'.<sup>5</sup> The book's first edition appeared in New York in 1950, a second edition was published a few years later in Lebanon, while in 1988 a reprint of the

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contested Swedish part of the colony's history was immortalized in the second volume of Selma Lagerlöf's novel *Jerusalem* (1901/2, English transl. 1913), and critically described by Edith Larsson, whose book appeared not long after Vester's version of the story, in 1957 (*Dalafolk i heligt land*, Stockholm; its English version was used by Dudman and Kark).

<sup>4</sup> Most explicitly so in Kark and Ariel, 'Messianism, Holiness, Charisma, and Community', but implicitly also in Shamir's "'Our Jerusalem'", pp. 33–40, 53–4 with its interpretation of the 'literal/regressive' emphasis of the Colony versus the 'symbolic/progressive' stance of other American ventures. The Colony features in many overviews of American Holy Land narratives: compare Lester I. Vogel, *To See a Promised Land: Americans and the Holy Land in the Nineteenth Century* (University Park, 1993), John Davis, *The Landscape of Belief: Encountering the Holy Land in Nineteenth-Century American Art and Culture* (Princeton, NJ, 1996) and Hilton Obenzinger, *American Palestine, Melville, Twain, and the Holy Land Mania* (Princeton, NJ, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Vester, *Our Jerusalem*, p. 357.

first edition was published in Jerusalem. This latest edition is still on sale in the bookshop of the now luxury Swiss-managed American Colony Hotel.<sup>6</sup>

### Our Jerusalem: The American Colony and Protestant Christianity

One of the most striking traits of Bertha Vester's narrative, at least for those familiar with some of the alternative histories of the American Colony, is the near-absence of references to the millennialist and sectarian origins of the Colony. Those who would read only Vester's version would think that the Colony was never anything else than a somewhat premature ecumenical community, thoroughly committed to the religiously and ethnically diverse world of Palestine, whose members were at ease with all sectors of the population, all the while maintaining a strong middle class consciousness of progress and reform.

Vester describes her parents' move to Jerusalem primarily as a way to deal with the extraordinary personal disasters that had struck them, losing four daughters in a shipwreck from which Anna Spafford was the sole survivor, and later seeing a son succumb to scarlet fever. According to Vester, they went to find spiritual healing in the land where 'the "Man of Sorrows", acquainted with grief yet triumphant, had walked the shores of Galilee and the hills of Judea', hoping that 'His life and passion would be revealed in such a way that life would again bring consolation'.<sup>7</sup> Earlier, she had also mentioned her father's interest in theories of Anglo-Saxon Hebrew descent as one of the factors for choosing Palestine.<sup>8</sup> In passing, she refers to theological discussions that separated the Spaffords from their conservative Presbyterian community in Chicago and which had led to their expulsion. Rather than accepting the possibility of somehow being personally guilty for the deaths of his children, as some of the community thought was the case, her father found solace in progressive theological ideas, understanding God's love as saving all humanity from eternal punishment in hell.<sup>9</sup>

Any concrete form of pre-millennialism, however, that is, the expectation of Jesus' imminent return to the Holy Land ushering in a thousand-year reign of peace, is conspicuously absent from Vester's descriptions of her parents'

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<sup>6</sup> For the various editions, compare Dudman and Kark's notes in the bibliography. This author employed the Lebanese and the Jerusalem editions, the second of which appears to be a photographic reprint of the first, with identical paging, except for the repression of a controversial 'comprehensive background of the political evolutions', Ch. 32 of the Lebanese edition (pp. 359–81), questioning Jewish rights to a state in Palestine. For the modern American Colony hotel, see [www.americancolony.com](http://www.americancolony.com) (last visited 19 April 2009), where on the 'history' page, the early history of the hotel is even more conveniently made harmless than in Vester's account.

<sup>7</sup> Vester, *Our Jerusalem*, p. 59; compare Vogel, p. 154.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 24–5.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 57–9.

motivations. She therefore takes pains to deconstruct a story that circulated in America and Palestine, until much later in the Mandate period, about their group walking daily to the Mount of Olives with tea to be the first to meet the coming Christ. Vester writes that the tea was nothing more than her mother's courtesy to British friends who often came along to the Mount of Olives, a pleasant place for a family outing.<sup>10</sup> Vester clearly downplays the millennialist leanings of her parents, although her version leaves open the possibility that eschatological expectations and scenic picnic places might have overlapped rather easily in the millennialist worldview of her parents. Be that as it may, according to Vester her parents were never part of the religious 'cranks' of Jerusalem that she describes with a mixture of love and amusement.<sup>11</sup>

Vester was less evasive about the reasons for supporting the 'Gadites', the Yemenite Jews who had come to Jerusalem not long after the arrival of the Spafford group. They were called so by her father, Gad being one of the ten lost tribes of Israel that played such an important role in the pre-millennialist worldview. Horatio Spafford believed in the imminent return of the Jews to Palestine, and this promise seems to be fulfilled sooner than expected with the arrival of the graceful Yemenites, with their 'Classic Semitic features' so different from other Jews in Jerusalem and America. However, in the description, Vester downplays the millennialist motivations and focuses on the considerable effort that the early Colony made to support this group, one that, noticeably, had been rejected by the majority of Jews already in Palestine.<sup>12</sup> Doubts about millennialist fervour shine through clearly in her description of the projects of others, like that of the Swiss millennialist banker who built the Mea Shearim neighbourhood as a sensible investment in view of the coming of large numbers of Jews, and the rich Dutch

countess who started to build, but never finished, the huge 'Home of the Hundred and Forty-Four Thousand' in the late 1870s.<sup>13</sup>

An aspect of the Christianity of the early Colony that was largely congenial to Vester is the fact that its members refrained from any active attempts to convert the local population. Her daughter Anna Grace Lind summarized this in the preface of the 1988 edition:

Leading a simple communal life and frequently one of difficulty and hardship, they supported themselves [...]. They never attempted any missionary work but, through their friendship with all sections of the strange and wonderful people of Jerusalem's varied community, became involved in teaching and philanthropic work.<sup>14</sup>

The absence of overt conversionist activities distinguished the Colony from most other Western Christians in the Holy Land, whose primary object was missionary. Of these, the missionaries of the 'English Mission', short for the Church Missionary Society (CMS) that after 1879 had become largely independent from the Anglican Bishopric, are portrayed as the most conformist and narrow-minded Christians.<sup>15</sup> The Germans had a better press with Vester.

This may be partly attributed to her personal ties with the German missions through her German husband, Ferdinand Vester, the son of German-Swiss missionaries, but also to the German missions' stronger focus on relief work and schooling as compared to the CMS. The German Templar Colony had origins similar to their own and therefore may have been thought sympathetic.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 61: 'the proverbial tea basket without which no outing was complete for our British friends.' Dudman and Kark, *The American Colony*, p. 34, suggest that the story may have originated in a Chicago newspaper. In Lagerlöf's fiction, a similar daily walk to the Mount of Olives is used to map the religious development of Gertrud, one of the Swedish girls, changing gradually from the concrete daily expectation of Jesus' return to a more metaphoric understanding of Jesus' presence in a local dervish, enabling her to return to Sweden (compare *Jerusalem II*, in 'Påmorgonrodnadens vingar' and 'På Oljoberget').

<sup>11</sup> Vester, *Our Jerusalem*, pp. iii, 108–9.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., pp. 122–3. Much has been published on the Protestant missions in Palestine in the nineteenth and early twentieth century; a few recent monographs with further biographical references include Inger Marie Okkenhaug, *The Quality of Heroic Living, of High Endeavor and Adventure. Anglican Mission, Women and Education in Palestine, 1888–1948* (Leiden, 2002); Yaron Perry, *British Mission to the Jews in Nineteenth-Century Palestine* (London, 2003); Nancy L. Stockdale, *Colonial Encounters Among English and Palestinian Women, 1800–1948* (Gainesville, 2007), Michael Marten, *Attempting to Bring the Gospel Home: Scottish Missions to Palestine, 1839–1917* (London, New York, 2006), Roland Löffler, *Protestanten in Palästina. Religionspolitik, Sozialer Protestantismus und Mission in den deutschen evangelischen und anglikanischen Institutionen des Heiligen Landes 1917–1939* (Stuttgart, 2008), and Charlotte van der Leest, 'Conversion and Conflict in Palestine: The Missions of the Church Missionary Society and the Protestant Bishop Samuel Gobat', PhD Dissertation, Leiden, 2008. For a concise overview of the different religious communities in Palestine in the early Mandate period, see Harry Charles Luke, Edward Keith-Roach, *The Handbook of Palestine* (London 1922), pp. 39–49.

<sup>13</sup> Vester, *Our Jerusalem*, pp. 85, 194, 189, 301.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 61: 'the proverbial tea basket without which no outing was complete for our British friends.' Dudman and Kark, *The American Colony*, p. 34, suggest that the story may have originated in a Chicago newspaper. In Lagerlöf's fiction, a similar daily walk to the Mount of Olives is used to map the religious development of Gertrud, one of the Swedish girls, changing gradually from the concrete daily expectation of Jesus' return to a more metaphoric understanding of Jesus' presence in a local dervish, enabling her to return to Sweden (compare *Jerusalem II*, in 'Påmorgonrodnadens vingar' and 'På Oljoberget').

<sup>11</sup> Vester, *Our Jerusalem*, p. 27: 'Jerusalem attracts all kinds of people. Religious fanatics and cranks of different degrees of mental derangement seem drawn as by a magnet to the Holy City'. See also pp. 132–41, where she describes a mixture of eccentric single women, spiritualist Germans, 'Latter-day prophets', Mormons, and missionaries of many varieties.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., pp. 142–9; here p. 143. The Colony's sympathy for this group seems to draw on a mixture of millennialist hopes of the ingathering of the Jews, supported by dreams and visions from the Yemeni themselves, the Orientalist appreciation of the primitivism ('purity') of the Yemeni's compared to the Westernized Jews of America and the Ashkenazi living in Jerusalem, and the Yemeni's ostracization by the Jewish community of Jerusalem. The Colony's early 'Christian-Zionism' is also confirmed by Anna Spafford's testimonies in Chicago, in 1895. See Dudman and Kark, *The American Colony*, p. 101.

The Colony had the strongest ties with the mission of the American Friends (Quakers) in Ramallah, whose members, like the Colony, saw education and relief work as their first aim, and conversion something to be left to God, or at least to the slow and non-coercive longterm influence of Christian 'ethics and way of life'.<sup>17</sup> In fact, although the Colony did not actively seek to convert those coming into its sphere of influence, a few converts hold important places in the Colony, like the Muslim convert Maarouf who had been baptized by her father, and Jacob, her foster-brother, whose parents had converted to Christianity. He was 'formally adopted' by the Spaffords a few years after their arrival, in 1883.<sup>18</sup>

According to Vester, the Colony's non-missionary stance was one of the reasons for the opposition it encountered from some of the other missions, the 'narrow regard of the conformists for the non-conforming'.<sup>19</sup> Jealousy over their successful relief work might have been another, especially since, according to an earlier decision of British and American mission boards, Palestine was supposed to be the domain of British rather than American missionaries.<sup>20</sup> Again downplayed by Vester, however, was their undogmatic approach to Christianity and aspects of their communal life style, which included celibacy in anticipation of the imminent return of the Lord and female leadership, unusual at the time.<sup>21</sup>

The conflict became nasty when one of the long-standing American consuls in Jerusalem, Selah Merrill, a staunch Presbyterian minister, became involved in a financial and custody dispute. Vester pays detailed attention to this long drawn-out battle, not only because it dominated most of her childhood, but also because the episode fits well into one of the main themes of her book: the development of the American Colony from a persecuted group ahead of its times to a highly regarded part of respectable Jerusalem society.<sup>22</sup>

Whereas perhaps the year 1908, when the Colony emerged victorious from the court battle with Merrill, can be seen as the formal moment of acceptance into respectable society, the change had set in earlier in the century. In retrospect, Selma Lagerlöf's visit in 1900 inaugurated it, although she was not the first prominent visitor who left the Colony convinced of their laudable and perfectly acceptable motives. The year 1904 was also important. Then, after a courtship of almost ten years, Bertha Spafford was allowed to marry Ferdinand Vester. This first wedding in the Colony, which was celebrated with a reception with hundreds

<sup>17</sup> Vester, *Our Jerusalem*, pp. 121, 259.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 76–8 on Maarouf, and pp. 95–8 on Jacob. On the latter, see also Dudman and Kark, *The American Colony*, pp. 48–9.

<sup>19</sup> Vester, *Our Jerusalem*, p. 121.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Vester is defensive about the dogmatic viewpoints of the early Colony, especially when it concerns her father; compare pp. 121–3 and 162–3; compare further Dudman and Kark, *The American Colony*, pp. 57–8.

<sup>22</sup> Compare, among many other passages, Vester, *Our Jerusalem*, pp. 79, 121–3, 174; see further Dudman and Kark, *The American Colony*, pp. 91–101, 128–44.

of invitees, ended its unofficial policy of celibacy.<sup>23</sup> In the same year, members of the Colony participated in an international conference of Sunday School teachers in Jerusalem, introducing them to the mainstream Protestant circles in the city.<sup>24</sup>

To some extent, these developments may be attributed to changes in the surrounding environment, like the arrival of more congenial American consuls and changes in the make-up of Jerusalem's Protestant community as a whole. More importantly, it may have been a generational issue. The second generation of American and Swedish Colonists introduced new ways of living that were less isolated from the rest of Jerusalem and more in tune with mainstream, mainly Western and Protestant, Christianity. The growing stream of Western pilgrim-tourists further increased the relative weight of the new generation by providing further opportunities to increase the income of the Colony. Some younger members started a very successful photo-department that sold slides of the Holy Land to visitors, others did the same with locally produced souvenirs that were sold in a handicraft shop near Jaffa gate.<sup>25</sup>

The most important changes, however, came with the death of Bertha's mother, Anna Spafford. She died in 1923, and until that time was still in charge, and making decisions about the religious and practical policy of the Colony. As far as can be established from the published sources, she probably held on to much of the exclusive spirituality of the earlier period. After Anna Spafford died, however, in 1923, the days of charismatic and more or less unchallenged leadership were over. Rivalries between the leading Swedish and American families ensued, resulting in the break-up of the Colony after it had been reorganized with an official constitution with the possibility of private ownership. Over time, most of the Swedish members left and returned to Sweden, being much troubled by Bertha Vester's reorganization and regretting the loss of the spiritual atmosphere that had been created and sustained by her mother.<sup>26</sup>

While the Colony's original ethics and ideals were compromised by struggles for power and the demands of the twentieth century, some elements of it were successfully translated into the jargon of the postwar ecumenical movement. In 1925, at the Life and Work Conference in Stockholm, Selma Lagerlöf recalled her 1900 visit to Jerusalem. She interpreted Anna Spafford's vision of 'unity' to be

<sup>23</sup> Vester, *Our Jerusalem*, pp. 203–5; Dudman and Kark, *The American Colony*, pp. 59, 157–61.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 200–205.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 195, 287; Dudman and Kark, *The American Colony*, pp. 152–3, 163, 180–82, 221–2.

<sup>26</sup> For Vester's brief covering of this episode, see *Our Jerusalem*, pp. 338–40; for a further discussion see Dudman and Kark, *The American Colony*, pp. 227–9. One wonders whether the removal of the American Colony in the third edition of *The Handbook of Palestine and Trans-Jordan* (London, 1934), pp. 45–6, also edited by Harry Charles Luke and Edward Keith-Roach, is due to this change of status from a religious community to an incorporated welfare institution.

expressed in 'work and modes of living' as an example for Christian ecumenical thought and living, inspiring the delegates to new models of international cooperation after the ravages of the war. Vester's extensive quotation of this address suggests that she wholeheartedly endorsed this interpretation of her mother's heritage.<sup>27</sup> In the meantime, Vester, supported by her husband and her sister Grace Whiting, continued much of the earlier philanthropic work of the Colony. Childcare was the most important aspect of this and became institutionalized in the hospital that was to receive the name of her mother. Many other ad-hoc projects were added as the circumstances demanded, varying from nursing the wounded and providing basic food rations during the War to all kinds of social projects in the mandatory period. Meanwhile, the 'Big House' of the Colony was used more and more as a hotel and meeting place, receiving guests from many different backgrounds and playing a notable role in the social life of mandatory Palestine.<sup>28</sup>

### Our Jerusalem: the American Colony and Middle-Eastern Christianity

Despite Vester's appreciation of the 'unity-among-Christians' motive so eloquently put forward by Lagerlöf, her personal distance from the Eastern Christian communities is striking. Not that she is unaware of the subtle signs that differentiate the various groups: though she pays little to no attention to dogmatic differences between them, she obviously is well at home in the complicated geography of the local Christians. The references in her book give a near complete overview of the most important communities, from the Greek Orthodox with its tensions between Greek hierarchy and Arab laity, via the autochthonous Greek Catholic and Armenian communities, to the Russian, Macedonian and Coptic pilgrims, as well as the Armenian and Assyrian refugees from Turkish Anatolia during and after World War One.

However, compared to the detail in which some Muslim Arab, Bedouin and Jewish personalities are described,<sup>29</sup> most Eastern Christians remain distant dignitaries that were not part of the social circle of the American Colony.<sup>30</sup> The

<sup>27</sup> Vester, *Our Jerusalem*, pp. 201–3, 341.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 286–9; Dudman and Kark, *The American Colony*, pp. 214–23.

<sup>29</sup> The Colony's connections with the 'aristocratic' Palestinian and Bedouin families are regularly noted, Vester, *Our Jerusalem*, pp. 203, 222, referring amongst others to the Khalidi, Husseini, and Nashashibi families. Her book is most sympathetic about the Bedouins, romanticizing their lifestyle, see pp. 155–61.

<sup>30</sup> A much more intimate description of the various Christian communities is found in Sir Harry Luke's account of his first period in Palestine, covering part of the same period and published in the early 1950s, *Cities and Men: An Autobiography*, vol. II (London, 1953), pp. 202–56. Luke, then assistant-governor of Jerusalem, interprets the continuous inter-Christian rivalries as reflecting a 'fairly vital' inspiration, certainly not something to be dismissed as irrelevant, p. 237.

only exceptions are a few of the servants that were dear to her in her youth, like her nurse Mariam and her daughter Hannieh as well as a cook that was 'a Christian peasant woman from Ramallah'.<sup>31</sup> Not that Vester is given to the rhetoric of many of the missionaries of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: she never describes the Eastern Christians as 'nominal' Christians, in need of salvation through Evangelical conversion. However, the descriptions of the cordial relations that existed between the Colony and the local Christians, visiting each other's functions and supporting each other's welfare activities, implicitly underline the fundamental distance between the two types of Christianity. Vester never portrays the American Colony as being part of Palestine's Christian community.<sup>32</sup>

In describing her life in Jerusalem, she could not, however, gloss over the world of Christian pilgrimage, the most conspicuous characteristic of Christianity, western and eastern, in the Holy City. On this subject, Vester displays the same ambiguities as many of the late nineteenth century Protestant writers. On the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, 'quite unlikely to be the authentic spot',<sup>33</sup> she extensively quotes her cousin Rob, writing soon after their arrival in Jerusalem:

'Thousands come to worship here from all parts of the world. This alone makes it sacred. But on entering you see Turkish custodians sitting cross-legged on an elevated platform. Just think of its being necessary, in the most sacred church of Christendom, to place a lot of these men there to keep Christians from fighting'. This church, so familiar to us as children, had a large courtyard and Rob describes the way it was 'always crowded with vendors of rosaries, relics, pictures, and the endless little knick-knacks of olivewood made for the tourists and the pilgrims, and the miserable-looking beggars raised the cry of "baksheesh" with redoubled vigour there'. Rob wrote that 'it was impossible to imagine the wealth represented in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, with its costly images, jeweled halos, and altars covered with precious articles of gemmed silver and gold'.<sup>34</sup>

After having lived in Jerusalem for about 65 years, these early impressions made it unadulterated into her memoir, suggesting that like generations of Protestants before her, Vester shared much of the typically Protestant estimations of this 'most sacred church of Christendom'. According to her, the location is sacred by virtue of its history and visitors rather than by its claims to authenticity, and at the same time is desecrated by the quarrels of the Christian communities and the presence

<sup>31</sup> Vester, *Our Jerusalem*, pp. 73–5.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 180–81, 259 and 287.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 92–3.

of beggars and vendors of religious memorabilia – the usual themes in many early and later Protestant travelogues.<sup>35</sup>

Like these earlier Protestants, Vester and her family's spirituality was nourished not by 'foul-smelling shrines' that are duplicated for the need of rivalling Christian communities, but by landscapes and people that refer us to Jesus:

Greasy and repulsive looking many may be on the outside, but earnest souls can dwell in dirty garments. The hills and valleys and the costumes of the people are those He saw, and one finds Jesus wherever one may go in the Holy Land.<sup>36</sup>

The Spaffords' and Vesters' connection to the Holy Land is seen in outings to the Bedouins of Jordan whose way of living brings one back to biblical times, by enjoying 'Capernaum and other places around the lake so sacred in memory', as well as closely following and being involved in the archaeological discoveries in the Holy Land that brought the Bible to life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>37</sup>

Vester's memoir indicates that, for a short period, a more immediate participation in local Christian ritual took place. When she had just arrived, her Palestinian nurses repeatedly took her to visit churches in Jerusalem, teaching her the appropriate postures and gestures. One day she visited the Holy Sepulchre with her father, and upon nearing the Stone of Unction, 'knelt, kissed the stone, and crossed myself'. Her father was shocked and 'put a stop to all this', preventing her from being further initiated in this other Christian world.<sup>38</sup> Except for these few pages that refer to a more intimate knowledge of local Christian ritual during her childhood, nothing in her book suggests that she ever wondered whether it would have been possible to become part of this other world.

<sup>35</sup> See Heleen Murre-van den Berg, 'William McClure Thomson's *The Land and the Book* (1859): Pilgrimage and Mission in Palestine', in Heleen Murre-van den Berg (ed.), *New Faith in Ancient Lands. Western Missions in the Middle East in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries* (Leiden, 2006), pp. 43–63. Compared to Lagerlöf, however, Vester is fairly distant about the inner-Christian quarrels; Lagerlöf interprets these rivalries as 'Jerusalem killing her children', see *Jerusalem II*, 'Guds heliga stad, Jerusalem'.

<sup>36</sup> Vester, *Our Jerusalem*, p. 152.

<sup>37</sup> For some examples (scattered all through the book), compare Vester, pp. 90, 101, 102, 155, 232–4, 243, 317. This Protestant perspective on the Holy Land has been captured in a collection of American Colony photographs by Eric Matson that were bought by Arie Speelman around 1930, and recently published in Richard Hardiman and Helen Speelman, *In the Footsteps of Abraham: The Holy Land in Hand-Painted Photographs* (New York: Woodstock, 2008).

<sup>38</sup> Vester, *Our Jerusalem*, pp. 74–5. Note that her father's disapproval included not just Eastern Christian ritual, but also food and local custom; cf. p. 100: 'We children were never allowed to wear the attractive native costumes, as this might be construed as a letting down of standards. But we did wear at home, and loved, the little red native slippers.'

The most important passages on the Eastern Christians in Vester's memoir concern social, economic and political issues. As in many other western texts on Palestine, the intra-Christian quarrels connected to the contested possession of the Holy Places are warranted ample attention, but more in passing than as a real theme. She describes the tensions of the Easter period, when crowds of Christian pilgrims mingled with the rival Muslim Nebi Musa procession, putting particular pressure on the authorities. First the Turks and later the British are described as needing much skill to guide the excitable masses. She also credited the British for persuading the Greeks of Bethlehem to take down a wall that cut off the iconostasis of the Church of the Nativity from view.<sup>39</sup>

On occasion Vester mentions tensions between Christians and Muslims, first during the so-called Parker-episode in 1910 when a few British amateur archaeologists started to excavate on the Temple Mount. This resulted in an increase in Christian-Muslim tensions during the Easter week, but the Ottoman authorities were able to prevent casualties.<sup>40</sup> After the First World War, Vester describes how Palestinians saw the consequences of the massacres of Christians in Anatolia. Armenian refugees found shelter in Jerusalem among the long-standing Armenian community of the city. Among these were also Armenian and Assyrian women who had been forcibly married to Muslim husbands during the war, and who fled or were ransomed in the later 1920s through the work of Kerin Yappe.<sup>41</sup> Another example of Muslim-Christian tensions that Vester describes was a feud between Muslim Circassians and Christian Arabs in the Salt region (Jordan).<sup>42</sup> However, Muslim-Christian tensions are never generalized; if Vester writes about inter-communal conflict in the Holy Land, it is between 'Arabs and Jews', not between Christians and Muslims.

It is the difficulties within the Orthodox communities that are noticeably treated in more detail. Among these, the ongoing conflicts between the Greek-speaking hierarchy and the Arab-speaking laity is the most important to her, with her sympathies squarely on the side of the Arab 'natives' against the 'Hellenic' elites from Greece and Cyprus. The Young Turk revolt of 1908 brought opportunities for the Arab Orthodox to search for equal rights, leading to violent quarrels within the Greek party. The situation hardly improved under the British, because the Russian Revolution of 1917 had plunged the Greek Church in Palestine into a financial crisis. Both the Greek and the Russian Orthodox Churches were largely dependent

<sup>39</sup> Vester, *Our Jerusalem*, pp. 114–16, 229, 291–2. On the Holy Sepulchre in this period, see Raymond Cohen, *Saving the Holy Sepulchre: How Rival Christians Came Together to Rescue their Holiest Shrine* (Oxford, 2008).

<sup>40</sup> Vester, *Our Jerusalem*, pp. 225–9.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 323; usually written as Karen Jeppe, see Inger Marie Okkenhaug, 'Scandinavian Welfare and the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, 1905–1917', in Nefissa Naguib, Inger Marie Okkenhaug (eds), *Interpreting Welfare and Relief in the Middle East* (Leiden, Boston 2008), pp. 57–81; here p. 69.

<sup>42</sup> Vester, *Our Jerusalem*, p. 300: no exact date, post 1920.

on funds from the Balkans and Russia, not only via thousands of pilgrims and their contributions, but also because of vast possessions that were confiscated by the communists.<sup>43</sup> Vester writes in less detail about the consequences of politics for the two other major churches of Jerusalem, the Armenians and the Catholics. She mentions that in 1908, again inspired by the Young Turk Revolution, the Armenian community 'showed its independence by rising as one man in a threatening manner, and would not be quieted until the government ordered the removal from his position of an obnoxious factotum of the aged Patriarch', without explaining exactly why this old patriarch had to be removed. According to her, the Catholic community, including Roman and Greek Catholics, remained largely quiet, only having to contend with the demand for better housing facilities usually provided by the churches to their members, something that also played a role within the Arab Orthodox community.<sup>44</sup>

From Vester's point of view, the Catholic community of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was not very exciting, nor did it have a significant impact on the world she was part of. She includes the Catholic building projects in her overview of the developments of the late nineteenth century,<sup>45</sup> but the cursory notes hardly do justice to the prominent projects that Catholics of all kinds completed in this period. She further mentions a number of individual priests and bishops, the most important shrines, the involvement of the French and the Austrians in the Catholic community, and some cooperation with the Colony in welfare activities.<sup>46</sup> At the same time, she completely lacks the often virulent anti-Catholicism of many earlier Protestant writers and describes the Catholics as merely another group of Christians in Palestine, on a similar footing to the Orthodox, equally distant from the Western Protestant community. Neither a rival in missionary objectives nor in need of practical support, the Catholics were able to take care of themselves and, as such, of no great interest to Vester and the American Colony.

### Our Jerusalem: The Last Crusade

Perhaps, however, Vester deliberately ignored the Catholic claims to the Holy City. Her sympathies were with rival claims, that of Protestant Britain. It is no coincidence that the most vivid scenes in her memoir concern the occupation

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., pp. 86–8, 153–4, 223, 292–3.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 223.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., pp. 81–90.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., pp. 113–15, 265–6. For a concise overview, see Luke and Keith-Roach, *The Handbook of Palestine*, pp. 48–50; on the French connection compare Dominique Trimbur, 'Les Français et les communautés de Palestine au temps du Mandat britannique', in Nadine Méouchy and Peter Sluglett (eds), *The British and French Mandates in Comparative Perspectives / Les Mandats français et anglais dans une perspective comparative* (Leiden, 2004), 267–301.

of Jerusalem by British troops in 1917. General Allenby's entry into the city on foot is given particular significance, not only in contradistinction to Kaiser Wilhelm's pompous entrance almost twenty years earlier (in 1898), but as a token of Allenby's sincere Christian devotion: 'to do honour to his Master, [he] walked into the Holy City as a pilgrim'.<sup>47</sup> Vester is well aware of the fact that Allenby, as the British Commander-in-Chief, could never be a simple pilgrim: he is described as the deliverer of 'the Ottoman yoke', of bringing the first 'so-called Christian government' 'since the Crusaders were driven out by Saladin'.<sup>48</sup>

That the reference to the Crusaders is not an incidental slip of the pen becomes clear on the same page, where Vester takes the Crusader rhetoric even further: 'We thought then we were witnessing the triumph of the last crusade. A Christian nation had conquered Palestine!'<sup>49</sup> Later, she recalls a ring that her husband had given to her on the occasion: adorned with a Crusader cross and inscribed with the date of Allenby's entrance into Jerusalem.<sup>50</sup> Without using any explicit biblical eschatological terminology, this 'last crusade' by a Christian power in the Holy Land is painted in distinctly millennial, but inner-worldly, tones. According to Vester, Sunday morning, 9 December 1917, began with glorious sunshine, after many days of rain: 'Nature seems in tune with the joyful expectation of deliverance'.<sup>51</sup> Later, after the news of the end of Ottoman rule sinks in, the people go into the streets, 'Everyone was happy, and good will toward men was the universal feeling. Jerusalem was a new city. Strangers greeted and congratulated one another'.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Vester, *Our Jerusalem*, p. 279. In this observation, she echoes sentiments of the British press in those years, compare Bar Yosef, *The Holy Land in English Culture, 1799–1917* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 247–50; he stresses the 'limited currency' of this imagery among British soldiers and administrators in Palestine.

<sup>48</sup> Vester, *Our Jerusalem*, p. 280; the insertion 'so-called' here is perhaps to acknowledge the fact that the British government of Palestine never was officially a 'Christian' government. It was obviously perceived as such, by many of the British and foreigners in Jerusalem, as well as by the local population.

<sup>49</sup> Vester, *Our Jerusalem*, p. 280; 'his victorious entry' is again referred to in 1933, when Allenby was in Jerusalem to open the new YMCA building, p. 342.

<sup>50</sup> Vester, *Our Jerusalem*, p. 376. On the Crusader rhetoric in the British campaign, compare Bar-Yosef, *The Holy Land in English Culture*, pp. 247–94, who describes different aspects of it: the abundant use of the Crusader rhetoric in newspapers, pamphlets and popular publications in England, the cautions not to use it in internal army/political communications, the common soldiers' sentimental pietistic notions of the Holy Land together with their debunking of the land in view of the difficult circumstances (with milk and honey extremely difficult to come by).

<sup>51</sup> Vester, *Our Jerusalem*, p. 273. Another natural event in tune with the course of history was a beautiful old terebinth whose death was said to 'signal the end of Turkish rule in Palestine'. 'By strange coincidence' this tree died in 1917; cf. Vester, *Our Jerusalem*, pp. 90–91.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 277.

A new world was born, the beginning of the millennium, a new era in the progressive history of humankind.

Vester is enough of a realist to continue her description of British rule in a rather more modest manner, focusing on the difficulties that the British had to contend with in trying to balance Jewish immigration with Arab rights, as well as in keeping the peace between the rival Christian communities in the Holy Land.<sup>53</sup> She also describes the important efforts that the British made in improving healthcare, sanitation, communications and commerce in the city.<sup>54</sup> Despite the matter-of-fact tone, however, there remains a real sense of wonder, of the feeling that a new era for Jerusalem had dawned, inaugurated by the British and supported by the Americans, making life in Jerusalem better than it had ever been before. American participation was symbolized by the head of the Red Cross, John Finley, whom she admired greatly and whose millennialist interpretations of the British presence might have inspired her own.<sup>55</sup> The American Colony's welfare work found its apogee in the opening of a new wing of the Anna Spafford Baby Hospital, with all the appropriate worldly and clerical dignitaries present, in 1936.<sup>56</sup>

Not surprisingly, Vester's Jerusalem of the mandatory era seems to be a thoroughly enjoyable place. While ignoring most of the difficulties within the American Colony at the time, Vester describes her family as being part of the elite of Jerusalem society, where British, American, Jewish, Muslim and Christian Arab cordially mingled during official receptions and ceremonies. The expatriates, British, American and sometimes German, together enjoy their picnics and camping trips to the Mount of Olives, Galilee, the Jordan and the Jordanian desert.<sup>57</sup> Name dropping, a conspicuous feature of her book, becomes a veritable who's who of Palestine at the time, including her personal acquaintance with all of Palestine's governors and High Commissioners, with their wives and children,

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 292; she writes about Sir Ronald Storrs: 'It was largely because of his personal efforts and his remarkable insight and understanding of traditions belonging to the Eastern churches that the ceremony of the Holy Fire passed off without military or police intervention inside the church. This had never happened before'.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., pp. 206–8.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 294: 'To have had the privilege of knowing Colonel Finley is one of the treasured memories of my life. When he came to Palestine as Red Cross commissioner for the Near East it was on a mission that appealed deeply to every part of his being. The vision then dawning of a better order in the Near East, the belief that the United States might contribute to it, and the fact that the British cause was represented by such gifted men as Allenby, Lawrence and Storrs, gave the great undertaking an atmosphere of hope.' Finley's book, *A Pilgrim in Palestine* (New York, 1920), is much more explicit in its millennialism and crusader rhetoric (e.g., connecting the Red Cross and Crusader Cross, pp. 216–7) than Vester; this may be partly a matter of temperament, but more likely Vester's interpretation of the early British period is coloured by what she perceived as its bitter ending.

<sup>56</sup> Vester, *Our Jerusalem*, p. 335.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., pp. 289, 304, 317, 324–5, 333.

as well as famous figures from the wider Middle Eastern colonial elites such as T.E. Lawrence and Gertrude Bell.<sup>58</sup>

In the background, however, of Vester's rather merry Mandate, the sounds of shooting and bombing become louder and louder, attesting to the increasing tensions between the Arab and Jewish communities. As the last, later suppressed, chapter explicates, Vester's sympathies more and more came to be with the Arab side of the conflict. In her opinion, Jewish claims to the land were unfounded, claiming 'return' while most of the immigrants had no Palestinian connection.<sup>59</sup> Her previous narrative had already prepared the reader for this: the way Vester described the Colony's long-time connection with the Arab population of the Holy Land, especially with the more progressive and modernist parts of it, as well as her own close connections to the British Mandate establishment that became weary of ongoing Jewish immigration, would have made another outcome unlikely. This was even more true after its ending, when the American Colony had lived through the 1948 War in an Arab quarter of Jerusalem.<sup>60</sup> Her advocacy of the Arab nationalist cause, therefore, is closely connected to the gradual but complete departure from her parents' earlier pre-millennialist proto-Zionist convictions that may have started already in the early 1900s.<sup>61</sup> On 15 May 1948, Bertha Vester took off the Crusader ring her husband had given her on Allenby's entrance. When the British left the country, 'our dream that this was the Last Crusade became a nightmare'.<sup>62</sup>

## Conclusion

The pessimistic ending of the Lebanese edition, however, became nuanced once again in the Jerusalem edition of 1988. Not only was this last controversial chapter removed from the reprint, a new epilogue was added instead. Bertha Vester's daughter and daughter-in-law, Anna Grace Lind and Valentine Vester, briefly

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 78, quoting her father: 'at one time or another the world and his wife come to Jerusalem ...', on Lawrence, see pp. 290–92, on Bell see p. 193. Almost every page bears the name of one or another colonial officer, religious dignitary, writer, painter, scholar or traveller, especially in the pages covering the British Mandate period. See further A.J. Sherman, *Mandate Days: British Lives in Palestine, 1918–1948* (London, 1997).

<sup>59</sup> Vester, *Our Jerusalem*, pp. 360–61.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., pp. 348, 351–8, 376–81.

<sup>61</sup> Compare Shamir in "'Our Jerusalem'", pp. 53–5, who understands Vester's anti-Zionism more from the earlier post-bellum American discussions (that is, from the pre-millennialist motivations of Vester's parents) than from the context of the twentieth century, especially the British Mandate. In this connection, Shamir also underestimates Vester's appreciation of modern Arab nationalism which is found in *Our Jerusalem*, pp. 367–8.

<sup>62</sup> Vester, *Our Jerusalem*, 376; compare also Dudman and Kark, *The American Colony*, p. 253.

recalled the years when the Colony was part of Jordanian Jerusalem and the transference to Israeli governance in 1967. They once again invoked the neutrality that had enabled the American Colony to live through a succession of different governments. They quoted Bertha Vester, shortly before her death, who remarked: 'I have lived under the Turks, the British and the Jordanians and we have got along well with everyone. We shall do the same with the Israelis'.<sup>63</sup>

It is this neutrality, enabling the founding family of the American Colony to survive the changing times in the Middle East, that is one of its persistent characteristics. It dated from the early years of Horatio and Anna Spafford's pilgrimage to Jerusalem and lasted until the time of the international hotel and the children's hospital into the early twenty-first century.

This study of the Colony's view on the local Eastern Christians, however, suggests that this position is less neutral than its enduring ability to adapt suggests. It is qualified in at least three distinct ways: by its Protestantism, by its transnationalism and by its efforts to create an Orient suitable to the West, an East-West hybrid on mostly Western terms. All three qualifiers conflict with the choices and outlooks of the Christians of Palestine.

Despite the Colony's change from a pre-millennialist community to one characterized by liberal ecumenical Protestantism, its relationship to the Christians of Palestine remained ambiguous. Its vision of Christian unity and non-conversion was very much one on liberal Protestant terms, without acknowledging the riches that the Eastern Churches could contribute to the encounter. On the contrary, Vester appears to have shared much of the Protestant biases against Eastern Christian ritual and experience, interpreting the rivalry over the Holy Places as typical of the Eastern inability to solve differences over what, in her opinion, must have been secondary issues of a material nature. In this respect, her opinions also do not seem to have been influenced much by the contacts with British Anglicans, some of whom were certainly more receptive to Orthodox views on the importance of the material embodiment of the spiritual world in icons, buildings, saints and ritual.

Vester's distance from local Palestinian Christianity was also fed by another important characteristic of the Colony, that of its decidedly expatriate, non-Palestinian character. Whether emphasizing the Colony's American character through celebrations of American Independence day at Fourth-of-July parties, having her children educated at American or British schools, or in preferring an American passport for her German husband over a Palestinian one (although that is what he acquired shortly before the Second World War<sup>64</sup>), Vester apparently never saw the option of becoming a real part of local Palestinian society. The maintenance of this separatist character of the Colony, also exemplified in the fact that very few members of the Colony married into Palestinian society, appears to have been a matter of course, not a conscious choice, but rather the logical outcome of their being an 'American' Colony. Swedish, German and British

influences could be integrated into that identity, but the Colony's members were never tempted to integrate into Palestinian society. In this respect, the American Colony, on a very small scale, paralleled the Jewish colonialism that they rejected, by carving out their own Jerusalem, with its own aims and visions. From this perspective, the distance from the Palestinian Christians indicates that a common global Christianity was not able to overcome the differences between West and East, between Americans and Arab Christians.

Different from a number of Jewish, British and German colonial ventures in the Holy Land, however, the Colony was able to make the most of this non-Palestinian, transnational, character by becoming an important mediator between the variety of visitors to, and inhabitants of, Jerusalem. They did this not only in their aesthetic and romanticized translation of Arab and Bedouin traditions into biblical illustration, Orientalist decorating styles and Holy Land souvenirs, but also in what has become the Colony's most famous legacy, its provision of a meeting place for the different groups that contended over Jerusalem and the Holy Land. But even in this respect, the Christians of Palestine appear to have missed out. As the result of the all-pervasive influence of the Jewish-Arab conflict, but also because of the already existing distance between the Palestinian Christians and the American Colony, this meeting place still waits to be used to discuss some of the more pertinent issues concerning the position of the Christians of Palestine.

Vester's *Our Jerusalem* reflects some of the enduring difficulties of Palestinian Christianity, its complicated relationship with Protestantism and international Christianity and its secondary position due to the overriding importance of the Arab conflict with the Jewish state. It severely underestimates, however, many of the other aspects of its life and ritual that have sustained this Christianity as a vital part of the Holy Land. As such, Vester's Jerusalem, despite its unconventional and singular story, is as much a part of the Protestant Orientalist tradition as that of their missionary and mainline Protestant rivals of the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

<sup>63</sup> Vester, *Our Jerusalem*, p. 364 (Jerusalem edition).

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 305–6, 345–6.