
Chapter 5

THE HAREM ESH-SHARIF WAS FORT ANTONIA

THERE WAS A NAME to designate a Roman Camp that was different from the common word “Fort” or “Citadel.” All Roman encampments (especially permanent ones) were also known as *Praetoriums* because this is where the General had his headquarters.¹⁰⁴ A close examination of the records shows

¹⁰⁴ *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* has the following description of a *Praetorium*.

“*Praetorium* denoted a general’s tent (Livy 7.12, 10.31; *Caes. BCiv.* 1.76) or his staff or council (Livy 26.13.6). Hence comes the *porta praetoria* of Roman *castrametation* (see CAMPS). By an extension of meaning *Praetorium* signified the residence of a provincial governor (e.g. ILS 2298), a pleasure villa (e.g. Suet. *Tib.* 39), an official roadside resthouse (CIL iii.6123), or an emperor’s residence (CIL iii.5050). It is also regularly used for the forces or services of the Praetorian Prefect (CIL v.2837, viii.9391, etc.). In permanent fortresses or forts it is distinguished from the *principia*, or headquarters building, and clearly refers to the commandant’s house, a separate structural entity (Livy 28.25; Tac. *Ann.* 1.44; RIB 1092, 1685–6, 1912)” (p.874).

there were two *Praetoriums* in pre-war Jerusalem — the main Camp where the General in charge of the Legion had his command post (Fort Antonia), and an auxiliary *Praetorium* in the Upper City at Herod's palace where the Romans allowed the two Agrippas (I & II) to judge their people as client kings. In the time of Jesus, one could call each site a *Praetorium* or a Camp. The term fits the description of Antonia precisely.

Indeed, the designation *Praetorium* will prove helpful to us because the term is important in identifying the site of Fort Antonia after the war in 70 C.E. and up to the time of the Crusades. There are several later eyewitnesses who refer to the Haram esh-Sharif as the Roman *Praetorium* (Fort Antonia). It was especially significant because it was the place where Pilate judged Jesus on the day of crucifixion.

“Praetorium” and “Camp” Were Synonymous Terms

It is essential to recognize that both terms (*Praetorium* and *Camp*) were employed in the New Testament to mean the same thing. Note that Fort Antonia is equated with the phrase “the *Praetorium*.”¹⁰⁵ And in the original Greek of the New Testament, it was also called “the *Encampment*.”¹⁰⁶ In popular vernacular, one could refer to Fort Antonia as a “*Roman Praetorium*” or it could be called a “*Roman Camp*.” The words meant precisely the same thing. During the time of Jesus there were two *Praetoriums* in Jerusalem; neither was considered part of the Jewish City by the Jewish or Roman authorities when under strict imperial control.

To recognize this point, it is necessary to realize that before 6 C.E., in the time of Herod the Great and his successor Archelaus, Judaea was a client kingdom with a native king on the throne who ruled the people directly. The Jewish king answered to Augustus personally for his conduct. Augustus was the final arbiter in all political affairs within the Jewish state. During this period there

¹⁰⁵ John 18:28,33; 19:9. (the KJV translates the word as “judgment hall,” however, in Mark 15:16 the KJV retains the original “*Praetorium*”).

¹⁰⁶ Acts 21:34; 22:24; 23:10,16,32. The KJV renders the Greek by the word “castle,” but its actual meaning is “encampment.”

was a two-tier system of government in Jerusalem. One was local and Jewish, the other was imperial (international) and Roman. These two systems of government especially applied to judicial and military matters.

In Jerusalem during the time of the client kingdom of Herod and his son Archelaus there were actually two judgment halls (*Praetoria*) — one for judicial matters dealing with local and strictly native (Jewish) affairs and the other concerned imperial matters that directly involved Rome. We can see an example in the coastal city of Caesarea, which was the normal Roman headquarters for the district of Judaea (later called Palestine). In Caesarea there was not only the ordinary Roman *Praetorium*, but there was also another called “Herod’s judgment hall.” This was the local or subsidiary *Praetorium* which dealt only with Jewish affairs (Acts 23:35).

The same situation was found in Jerusalem. The local *Praetorium* was incorporated into Herod’s palace in the Upper City. It was accompanied by an area of a small encampment designed to house some of Herod’s soldiers. After the time of Herod and Archelaus these areas were for Roman soldiers (except the brief spans when Agrippa I & II were client kings). Adjacent to this small camp in the Upper City were the three fortresses of Phasael, Hippicus and Mariamne (which Josephus called the “local fortresses.”¹⁰⁷) This *Praetorium* in the Upper City was the judgment hall intended strictly for Jewish affairs.

When in 6 C.E. Rome assumed full provincial control of the client kingdom of Judaea, the area of Judaea ceased to be a “Jewish state” and became part of the imperial system like any other provincial region of the empire. After this acquisition by Rome, the local *Praetorium* at Herod’s palace in the Upper City (with its three “local fortresses”) finally became the normal living quarters of Pilate when he took command in Jerusalem. But there was also the other imperial *Praetorium*. This was the principal Roman *Praetorium* for Roman or international affairs. This was at Fort Antonia north of the Temple Mount. It was in Fort Antonia where

¹⁰⁷ *War* Introduction Book I.11 ¶29, Loeb edition.

the major body of Roman troops was quartered; the encampment referred to in the Book of Acts, and called the *Praetorium* in the Gospel of John.¹⁰⁸

Fort Antonia was also the fortress that Herod enlarged from being a former citadel called the Baris that the Hasmonians used to protect the Temple and the city.¹⁰⁹ So, the actual Roman *Praetorium* for imperial affairs from 6 C.E. onwards was Fort Antonia, the permanent military camp in pre-war Jerusalem. This Roman *Praetorium* of Fort Antonia was the headquarters of the General in charge of the Roman forces at the permanent fortress in Jerusalem *before* the war began.

This was where Pilate stayed during the Passover seasons to be near the Temple to control the crowds. This was where he judged Jesus. Since Jesus was charged at Passover with sedition against Caesar and the Roman Empire, the jurisdiction presiding in such matters was at the imperial *Praetorium*. At all Jewish festivals and other important occasions, Pilate (as would any Roman procurator) took up residence in the main *Praetorium* at Fort Antonia where he conducted most governmental activities.¹¹⁰

Why was it necessary for Pilate to have been resident at the main Roman fortress in Jerusalem at the time of the Passover? Let us recall an important point. Jesus was judged by Pilate at the time of the Jewish Passover. This is when the top Roman authority in Jerusalem needed to be at Fort Antonia to be in close quarters with his troops to supervise the vast numbers of Jewish people who crowded into Jerusalem at such times. Clearly, Pilate had left his

¹⁰⁸ As in the footnotes above, compare Acts 21:34; 22:24; 23:10,16,32; John 18:28,33; 19:9 and Mark 15:16.

¹⁰⁹ This fort was first built or enlarged, as it is supposed, by John Hyrcanus in about the year 107 B.C.E. He called it the "Baris," the Tower or Citadel. It was afterwards rebuilt with great improvements by Herod, under the government of Antonius, and was named from him "the Tower of Antonia." About the time when Herod rebuilt the temple, he seems to have put his last hand to it. See *Antiquities* XVIII.5,4; and *War* I.3,3; and 5,4.

¹¹⁰ *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* states: "In permanent fortresses or forts it is distinguished from the *principia*, or headquarters building, and clearly refers to the commandant's house, a separate structural entity (Livy 28.25; Tac. *Ann.* 1.44; RIB 1092, 1685–6, 1912)" (p.874).

personal home at the former palace of Herod in the Upper City and had taken up residence at Fort Antonia, at the imperial *Praetorium* in Jerusalem. This was where the main body of the legion of Roman troops had their encampment.

All that Remains of Early Jerusalem Is the Haram

The historical evidence from eyewitnesses attests to the fact that nothing was left of the Temple or Jewish Jerusalem after 70 C.E. Only the walls of the Haram have survived in the area as an outstanding architectural example of the splendor and majesty that graced the region in the days of Herod and Jesus — enduring the ravages of wars and all attempts to destroy it (if any) down to the period of Eusebius and to our own time.

Since the Haram has continued in the Jerusalem area, were there any ancient authorities who mentioned the Haram esh-Sharif during the first six centuries of our era? Yes, it was mentioned, and in a most conspicuous manner. Let us see.

The Haram Reckoned to be the Roman Praetorium

From 70 C.E. to 370 C.E., there was only one ancient eyewitness who referred to the walls of the Haram esh-Sharif as then existing in Jerusalem. That reference was made in 333 C.E. when a Christian pilgrim came to Jerusalem to view the holy places. He came from Bordeaux in what later became France and is known in historical literature as the Bordeaux Pilgrim. He was the first to give a systematic view of the Jerusalem of his time, and it was a meager account. But what he related at the beginning of the Byzantine period is important to us in confirming the site of the Temple of Herod and Jesus.

The first place the Bordeaux Pilgrim visited was the site of the Temple. What is remarkable about his account is that the Pilgrim's reference to the Temple and its adjacent buildings says *nothing* about going through the gate in a wall of Jerusalem to reach the site of the Temple. The Pilgrim speaks of the Temple as being *outside* the City of Aelia (Byzantine Jerusalem) as it existed at the time. Indeed, he did not enter what he called "Jerusalem" until

after his description of the Temple and the area around it. Only then did the Bordeaux Pilgrim state in his document that he entered Jerusalem by walking westward with the Siloam pool situated on his left which finally led him upward to the Upper Hill that was then called Zion (spelled “Sion” in Christian literature).

To this point in his journey, in what he called *inside* Jerusalem, he still had *not* gone through a gate in any wall. But this was soon remedied. He then wrote that he journeyed northward and came to a gate in the southern wall of the city, which he entered (this was his first time the Pilgrim found himself within any ramparts in the City of Jerusalem, then called Aelia). Once through this southern gate, he walked directly north and noted two buildings that caught his attention. These two constructions were the only ones *inside* the walls of Aelia that he considered important, or thought fit to describe. One building was the new and unfinished Church of the Holy Sepulchre on his left side (in the west) and another building was located on his right side (in the east). This latter building with walls surrounding it was situated, according to the Pilgrim, directly opposite (east of) the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. One should emphasize that to the Bordeaux Pilgrim this *eastern* construction had walls (“walls” in the plural) with its foundations within the Tyropoeon Valley.

He identified that “walled facility” as the *Praetorium*. He further described it as the former residence of Pilate, who was at that site in the time of Jesus’ trial. So, the walled area east of the Holy Sepulchre was an edifice that had remained in existence from the time of Pilate and Jesus. In other words, this structure survived the Roman/Jewish War of 66–70 C.E.

Since we are assured from earlier eyewitness records that *nothing* of “Jewish Jerusalem” or the Holy Temple (either their inner or outer walls) survived the war, the only candidate that remains to tally with the description of the Bordeaux Pilgrim is the former Fort Antonia — which in the time of Pilate and Jesus had the same technical name *Praetorium* connected to it.

This shows that the Bordeaux Pilgrim was looking at the broad view of the western side of the *Praetorium* with its walls (the

southern and western walls making the *southwestern* angle) that we called today the Haram esh-Sharif. It must be emphasized that the Pilgrim observed the *Praetorium's* walls (plural) with their foundations that reached downward to the lower areas of the Tyropoeon Valley. His description can only refer to the southwest corner of the Haram ramparts at the juncture of the southern and western walls near what we call "Robinson's Arch" being directly in front of him.

So, this earliest authority after the Roman/Jewish War, the Bordeaux Pilgrim, in referring to the Haram, correctly identified the site in the early 4th century as the place of the *Praetorium* where Pilate had his residence at the time of Jesus' trial. In the Roman world at the time, the word "*Praetorium*" was another synonym for the residence of the Roman General who had his abode in the center of a military camp of the legions. In simple terms, the Bordeaux Pilgrim in the early 4th century was well aware that the walls of the Haram esh-Sharif were those of the *Praetorium*, or in plain speaking, it was Fort Antonia, the former Camp of the Romans.

But there is more evidence of this fact from later Christian times. In the next chapter I will show further proof that the Haram esh-Sharif was recognized as the *Praetorium* where Pilate judged Jesus. It was NOT the former site of the Temple in the eyes of people in Jerusalem as late as the 6th century. Let us see.