



Eivor Andersen Oftestad: *The Lateran Church in Rome and the Ark of the Covenant: Housing the Holy Relics of Jerusalem* (Studies in the History of Medieval Religion). Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2019. XVI, 257 pp.

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An obscure twelfth-century document claiming that the main altar of the Lateran basilica in Rome has the ancient Ark of the Covenant hidden within – does that not sound more like the plot of a Hollywood spectacular than the topic of a scholarly treatise? Yet Eivor Andersen Oftestad shows how much we can learn about the hearts and minds of twelfth-century people (especially clerics) if we enter deeply into the background and ramifications of this claim, connected as it is with Jerusalem.

Because of its role in salvation history, the city of Jerusalem with its Temple Mount has always exercised a potent influence on Christian liturgy and imagination. In the fourth century, liturgical practices in Jerusalem quickly spread to the rest of the Church and still influence how Holy Week and Easter are celebrated. The Council of Chalcedon (451) made the bishop of Jerusalem a patriarch, and the church on Mount Zion came in time to be called *mater omnium ecclesiarum*. However, the claims of the earthly Jerusalem have also constantly been warded off in favour of “the Jerusalem above, our mother” (Gal. 4:26). Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335–c. 395) denounced Jerusalem pilgrimage as useless if not downright dangerous, and medieval exegesis was far more interested in the spiritual significance of the Temple and its furnishings than in the historical objects. But in the long period which we call the Middle Ages it is of course possible to discern fluctuations and changes of emphasis.

The starting point of Oftestad’s investigation is a text of about seven printed pages called *Descriptio Lateranensis Ecclesiae*. It is found in several versions in the Lateran archives as well as in thirteen manuscripts from monasteries in northern France and Belgium. After briefly describing the history of the Lateran, it goes on to enumerate altars and relics in the papal oratory of San Lorenzo and in the basilica San Giovanni itself. Some brief notes follow on the liturgy of these two churches and the clergy that performs it, after which more altars and relics as well as a couple of inscriptions are described. (It should be noted that this is the arrangement of the major group of French/Belgian manuscripts; the Lateran manuscripts contain versions with

other arrangements and more material, in particular a revised version by John the Deacon, composed between 1159 and 1181). Now, it is the merit of this little text that it is the oldest preserved witness to the claim that the main altar of San Giovanni housed the Ark of the Covenant, which in addition contained the rods of Moses and Aaron, the menorah from the tabernacle and the tablets of the Law. After a fire in 1308, the Ark and the two rods were actually placed on display outside the altar, and they remained on display until 1745, when Pope Benedict XIV ordered them to be removed – whether because he doubted their authenticity or because he did not want them to be venerated by Jews (which in fact happened) we do not know. Where they were moved to, no one seems to know, so there is indeed a mystery here for movie makers to cash in on.

The scholarly question posed by Oftestad is, however, different. What did this claim to possess the Ark of the Covenant mean? Her answer, presented already on page 1, is that “the Ark was presented as a proof that San Giovanni was ‘the temple of the New Covenant’ and the successor to the temple of Jerusalem”. This quick answer fortunately does not remove any of the excitement of what follows, because in order to substantiate it, Oftestad takes us on a quite breathtaking tour of holy places and colourful texts. The first two chapters lay the groundwork by presenting previous research on the *Descriptio* and a few theoretical concepts to be used in the study, after which the content of the *Descriptio* is summarized. Chapter three sets the centre stage, which is Rome: it presents the main Lateran manuscript, the history of the Lateran Chapter and conflicts and claims concerning papal primacy in the twelfth century.

The following two chapters broaden the stage: chapter four starts with the French/Belgian manuscripts, shows that the *Descriptio* in them appears together with several texts about Jerusalem, and argues that this is due to the capture of Jerusalem in 1099. Moreover, Oftestad analyzes texts on the Temple by (primarily) eleventh-century authors and contrasts them with texts from the early twelfth century. She is able to show that while before 1099 symbolic interpretations dominate, after that year the earthly city becomes a goal in itself. Its capture is now seen by some as a fulfilment of prophecy, and an anonymous Norman author even claims that it is superior in dignity and authority to Rome. It becomes possible to speak of the earthly city of Jerusalem as a figure of the heavenly city rather than as a symbol of the Church, which was the traditional view.

Chapter five, “In the Jerusalem Context”, delves even more deeply into this theme by exploring a variety of sources from and about Jerusalem at the beginning of the twelfth century. An early fascination with the Temple Mount and the Dome of the Rock gives way after a couple of decades to an increasing emphasis on sites

connected with the life of Christ, but not without setting its stamp on ways of talking about remnants of the Temple and its furnishings, which tend to be invested with spiritual significance of a more literal kind than before 1099. A nice touch in this chapter is that it also takes into consideration the fact that the canons of the *Templum Domini* (i.e. the Dome of the Rock) and of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem as well as of San Giovanni in Rome were simultaneously affected by the canonical reform movement.

Chapter six investigates how the canons of San Giovanni used Old Testament texts about priests and temple when framing their own identity. Basing herself primarily on the papal liturgy for Maundy Thursday and the Rule of Aachen, Oftestad concludes that the pope was seen to fulfil the role of the high priest in the temple while the canons saw themselves as the wider circle of Levites. The latter part of the chapter moves on to the question of how the presence of God, so significant in Old Testament texts about tabernacle and temple, was envisaged at the Lateran. Here, Oftestad is able to use liturgical texts for the dedication feast (celebrated on 9 November in San Giovanni), which intriguingly include texts for another, quite different feast called *Passio Ymaginis Domini*, celebrated on the same day. She argues that both sets of texts, in different ways, strongly stress the idea of Christ's presence.

The seventh and final chapter engages with yet two more sources: the *Historia Imaginis Salvatoris* by Nicolaus Maniacutius, a learned canon of the Lateran palace active around the middle of the twelfth century, and John the Deacon's version of the *Descriptio*. For Maniacutius, objects from the temple do not establish continuity between temple and Lateran but rather the opposite; as spoils they manifest God's vengeance on Jerusalem because of the crucifixion. God's presence is instead mediated by the sacred image of Christ in the papal oratory of San Lorenzo, which was said to have been painted by St. Luke and completed by angels. John the Deacon's text on the other hand, offered as a gift to Pope Alexander III, is concerned with proving that San Giovanni truly owns the authentic relics of the Temple. His emphasis is on continuity. But for both authors, the temple objects show that the Church is the true heir to and fulfilment of the Old Covenant. In this chapter, a subsidiary theme which runs right through the whole book culminates; both the Temple relics and the Old Testament imagery are vigorously used in the twelfth century to undergird and extol papal supremacy.

An epilogue interestingly notes that similar strategies of interpretation were used during the Renaissance in order to promote the building of new St. Peter's and again to enhance the authority of the pope. Then follow useful appendices, the first describing manuscripts of the *Descriptio*, the second setting forth the different ver-

sions of that text and the third providing an edition of it from the Vatican manuscript Reg. lat. 712 with an English translation.

As can be inferred from the above, this is a learned and thorough study. Oftestad employs a wide range of both primary and secondary sources. Among them are a couple of unpublished Latin texts of which she provides generous excerpts in the footnotes, always with a competent English translation. Her style is pleasant and the main body of text has few if any typographical errors (there are occasional typos in the footnotes). As for the content, I particularly appreciated the variegated nature of the texts studied and that they are not squeezed into a single mould. One gets a clear sense that the authors had different backgrounds and outlooks and that opinions changed over time. Oftestad respects her source material and handles both historical and theological problems with competence.

I have a slight quibble with her focus on 'legitimization'. Although she writes in the Introduction that, inspired by Aleida Assmann, she will use this word to designate the medieval understanding of tradition as a continued "presence of the past", I find that in practice it tends to mean defending the status of oneself and one's church. In other words, we remain in the paradigm of Marx and Weber which asserts that the struggle for power is the motor of history. Oftestad shows very deftly that there *were* conflicts and differences between different parties, but that is not the only reason why people say and do things. I wish she had paid a little more attention to the beautiful texts by Peter Damian (c. 988–1072) which she quotes here and there. An example: when Peter extolls the Lateran as the Church of Churches and Holy of Holies, he immediately adds that it is joined to the other churches with a mystic bond; they are like the extended arms of divine mercy which include the whole world in the embrace of the universal Church (PL 144, col. 256, the continuation of the passage quoted on p. 90, note 33). Love, in other words, is a historical force too.

I have some quibbles also with the edition in Appendix 3. The editorial principles stated on p. 216 are vague and incomplete. What do different kinds of brackets in the text mean and how are errors in the manuscript handled? As it turns out, the transcript of the *Descriptio* contains about a dozen obvious errors, where some seem to be typos while others probably stem from the manuscript. But how can we know? A case in point is the hexameter verses over the entrance to San Giovanni, which in Oftestad's transcript read:

*Sergius i[m]peras pius papa hanc qui cepit ab imis
Tercius explevit totam quam conspicis aulam.*

The first line is not even a hexameter as it stands, nor does it make sense, and a quick internet search shows that the second word should be *ipse*, not *imperas*. If this is a mistake in the manuscript, it is a mistake such as an editor has a duty to point out and correct, at least in a footnote. This said, I must add that the edition is very useful and that the competent translation which follows it will be quite sufficient for the purposes of most readers.

But what about the central hypothesis of the book, that San Giovanni was seen by some, at least for a time, as the “temple of the New Covenant”, a successor to the temple of Jerusalem? Does that hold? Well, no. For two simple reasons, I remain unconvinced. The first is that the main altar of San Giovanni did not, according to the *Descriptio*, contain only the Ark and other objects from the Temple, but also numerous wonderful relics associated with Christ, including the seamless tunic which the Virgin Mary had made for him and some of the blood and water from the wound in his side, as well as relics of Saints John the Baptist and John the Evangelist. Nothing in the text suggests that the Temple relics had a significance which the other relics did not have.

The second reason why I remain unconvinced is that all the Temple symbolism associated with San Giovanni in various texts (and Oftestad has found a lot) could just as well be applied to any parish church – and has been so applied, e.g. in rites for the dedication of a church and in sermons for the anniversary of dedication. And as for physical Temple symbolism, the main altar of the Cathedral of Lund also received many fine Jerusalem relics at its consecration in 1145 and it stood (and stands) above a crypt decorated in imitation of the Jerusalem temple. The Lateran had more fancy stuff, it is true, but it is a question of degree, not of kind.

The remarkable collection of relics in San Giovanni and the very high-strung things said about its liturgy and clergy in some sources are, in my opinion, a way of emphasizing its dignity, not an attempt to make it a literal successor of the Jerusalem temple. If the latter were true, it would be quite sensational, and Oftestad knows it. She knows what “judaizing” means in medieval sources. She knows that in medieval exegesis the true successor of the Jerusalem temple is, first and foremost, Christ himself, in whom the Divine Presence resides in its fullness; secondly the Church made of living stones, Christ’s mystical body; and thirdly the individual Christian as a member of the Church. She also knows, I’m sure, that when Temple symbolism has been introduced in church buildings and in ritual – which has happened throughout history but especially in the Middle Ages – the purpose has not been to claim a continued presence and validity of the old cult, but to remind people of the spiritual realities which the old cult signified. She knows, but wants to make the Lateran a glaring ex-

ception, an instance of an excessive theological literalism that held sway for a time in the wake of the First Crusade. An increased literalism at this time she does demonstrate, but not to the extent that people earnestly thought of the Lateran as an earthly successor to the temple of Jerusalem.

Does that matter? Not at all. Oftestad's hypothesis has inspired her to explore a wonderful world of events and ideas and to write a book full of valuable and nuanced insights. Even those who cannot follow her the whole way will benefit from sharing part of the journey with her.