

Egeria the Pilgrim: Pilgrimage as Sacred Time and Place

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“...Ostendebantur iuxta Scripturas: [the places] were shown according to the Scriptures.” These words open Egeria’s account of her travels through the Holy Land ca. 381-384 A.D.¹ Felicitously (or, as Egeria would no doubt say *iubente Deo*), for the ms. survives only in part, this fragmentary beginning captures the essence of the whole work: in it “the place,” the *realia* of 4th century Palestine, and the Scriptures are curiously interwoven. Everything Egeria sees and desires to see is “according to the Scriptures” – she follows an itinerary taken straight out of the Book of Exodus – and yet at every step she insists on *locus ipse*, the place itself, found outside the pages of Scripture in the mountains and valleys of the Holy Land. The world she sees is “storied,” fundamentally structured by the narratives of the Hebrew Scriptures, but the seeing of it in its own concrete existence, its historical reality, is crucial. Scripture and the Holy Land, the story and the place where the story may be traced, are two necessary parts of a single reality. In this interweaving of Scripture and land lies the peculiar genius of Egeria’s work, and its interest as an account of travel. Egeria’s travels describe a way of seeing so shaped by faith, and a faith so shaped by Scripture, that the stories of the faith “render the world” (as Hans Frei has said of pre-critical narrative reading of Scripture).² But her journey also insists on the world, in all its hard edges: to see the place is to know the story; even to live it. Travel thus has for Egeria transformative power: it provides for the pilgrim that marriage of story and place in which Scripture is realized and place is sanctified, and the traveler sees the glory of God as she realizes in herself the present holiness of each place.

Travel as transformation depends, however, on the equal power of the stories of Scripture and the land in which the stories unfold. Scholars often note the interplay between Scripture and the holy places in Egeria, but tend to describe her narrative in such a way that Scripture dominates the land. Mary Campbell is perhaps the most dramatic example. She finds that Egeria ignores the physical landscape before her, imposing on it another time and place, the story of Scripture: “her descriptions tend to render that other, sacred time and not her own.” Further, Scripture’s story as Egeria presents it is an essentially spiritual one: “the numinous had not yet been made corporeal:... Egeria then was not drawn to the concrete or its rendering.”³ J.-D. Dubois’ nuanced and insightful treatment (he notes for example that, as Scripture organizes the journey, it is sometimes also the case that the sites organize Scripture) nevertheless emphasizes the biblical narrative: it is *la lecture biblique*, particularly as practiced by the monks, that structures

¹ I use “A.D.” in this paper because it is so appropriate to Egeria’s world: for her, time and place are inscribed with the events of the life of “the Lord.”

² Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974).

³ Mary Campbell, *The Witness and the Other World: Exotic European Travel Writing, 400-1600* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 25;33.

time and place in Egeria's pilgrimage.⁴ E.D. Hunt reads the interplay between Scripture and land with care and sensitivity: the pilgrim hopes to "see the contents of the Scriptures in the setting of contemporary Palestine;" a seeing that elides the gap between the present and the biblical past.⁵ Though the land emerges in all its 4th century importance in his study, it is *as proof of Scripture*: the popularity of pilgrimage derives from "the pilgrims' literalistic regard for the actual holy places," the place as witness to the truth of the biblical story.⁶ The land points to Scripture: that is its significance.

Egeria's account itself, however, describes a more complex relationship between Scripture and land. Neither one can stand alone. It is not just that Scripture structures and reveals the world (as Frei holds); nor is it that the world – this world in particular, the holy land -- demonstrates the truth of Scripture. It is that Scripture and Land share a common meaning: both are sacred, both reveal the history of God's action in the world. It is precisely in the concrete, the place itself, that the numinous is discovered, as the pilgrim traces Scripture on the land. It is this conjunction of sacred story and sacred place that gives pilgrimage its power. Travel is a journey into holiness, in real time. This paper seeks to explore the intersection of land and scripture in Egeria's travel narrative, with particular attention to the significance of the land, so as to draw out the essential role of both. Hans Frei in one sense has it right: the 4th century Christian traveler walks in a world shaped by the biblical narrative and names it the true world.⁷ Yet the world is not merely passive, not merely shaped: the land of the Bible is a player in the story; it is through the land that the story is realized. Therefore the traveler does not only observe, but participates; the narrative becomes living drama, or in Egeria's terms, worship.

We will begin (after a brief look at who Egeria was) by tracing the way Egeria writes Scripture on the land, the essentially biblical and narrative shape of her journey, and then consider the way the land insists on its own importance. Finally, we will observe the account's movement beyond narrative to drama, or worship, the liturgical moment that repeatedly punctuates the narrative account and gives the work – and 4th century pilgrimage – its richness: the ability to hold together times and places, story and lived experience, in the communal rituals of the faithful.

From the beginning, it is clear that Egeria's journey over the mountains and plains of 4th century Palestine and the ancient journey of Israel as it is told in Scripture will be intertwined, and in such a way that the biblical narrative provides the shape for Egeria's own journey. Indeed, the priority of the biblical narrative is such that we learn, in the course of Egeria's narration, almost nothing about Egeria herself. Although this is her

⁴ Jean-Daniel Dubois, "Un pèlerinage bible en main: L'itinéraire d'Egérie (381-384)," in *Moïse géographe : Recherches sur les représentations juives et chrétiennes de l'espace* (ed. Alain Desreumaux and F. Schmidt; Paris : J. Vrin, 1988), 55-77, here 55 and 73. His final emphasis is also on the spiritual significance of the journey – the meeting with God, especially in a church, on the biblical route; a meeting which, in the company of monks and surrounded by Christian building projects, appropriated the history of Israel for the 4th century Christian community.

⁵ E.D. Hunt, *Holy Land Pilgrimage in the Later Roman Empire AD 312-460* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 106.

⁶ Hunt, *Holy Land Pilgrimage*, 91; 86-93. "The visible holy places of Jerusalem and Palestine formed precisely that element of secure reality which was missing elsewhere," i.e. in her "disembodied" Bible reading in far off Spain: they proved, that is, the biblical story (88).

⁷ See Frei, *Eclipse*, 2-3.

own first-person account (and so, as one scholar of travel literature has said, the first instance of travel literature in the West),⁸ it is a personal account without any interest in the author's own person. Egeria never mentions her own name, the names of her companions,⁹ the names of the friends to whom she writes; she gives us no information about her background, her birthplace, her interests or occupation. She appears solely as narrator of and actor in the biblical story now unfolding around her.

Curious scholars have pieced together from various hints a minimalist biography. The 7th century Spanish ascetic Valerius of Bierzo, writing to his brother monks of a "fragile woman's" journey through the Holy Land, a journey that is clearly the same one recorded in *Itinerarium Egeriae*, names her "most blessed Egeria, braver than all the men of the age."¹⁰ Valerius seems to claim her as one of their own, a saint from the time when the catholic faith had finally begun to "shine brightly" in the West; she may thus have come from his own region, Galicia in northern Spain.¹¹ She writes to a group of women back home whom she calls "ladies, venerable sisters" (3.8; 20.5), "ladies of my soul" (19.19), "ladies, my light" (23.10); women whom she clearly believes to be as passionate about the Scriptures as she herself is. Perhaps this is an early religious order, as Valerius suggests in calling her *sanctimonialis* (*Epist. 1*) and as her detailed accounts of liturgical matters may imply; perhaps it is, as one scholar has suggested, a devout women's reading group, a kind of ancient book-club of the Bible.¹² Egeria writes simply and in a rather strange Latin; she shows no knowledge of the Latin classics and does not appear to know Greek; her education may thus have been minimal. But she writes also with an impressive narrative clarity and power, and with considerable rhetorical skill.¹³ The one thing we know incontrovertibly about her is that she was wealthy – wealthy enough to

⁸ Mary Campbell, *The Witness and the Other World: Exotic European Travel Writing, 400-1600* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 21

⁹ With the single exception of Marthana, a deaconess and Egeria's good friend.

¹⁰ Valerius, *Epist. 1*, ed. and trans. M. Diaz y Diaz in *Egérie : Journal de voyage et lettre sur la Bse. Egérie* (ed. P. Maraval et M. Diaz y Diaz; SC 296; Paris : Cerf, 1982). Scholars agree that Valerius here refers to our author. The correct spelling of her name is uncertain, as the ms. tradition of Valerius' letter preserves five spellings: Egeria, Eiheria, Echeria, Heteria and Etheria. Two of these, however, are phonetic variations of Egeria (Eiheria; Echeria); Heteria-Etheria (the first a variant of the second) occurs in only one ms. family, and not in the best witness in that family; the best witness twice reads "Egeria." Etheria may, further, be explained as a later development from Egeria. Consensus now therefore favours Egeria. See the helpful discussion in Maraval (*Egérie*, 16-18), summarizing A. Lambert, "Egeria. Notes critiques sur la tradition de son nom et celle de l'*Itinérarium*," *Revue Mabillon* 26 (1936), 71-94.

¹¹ Valerius, *Epist. 1*. A reference in her letter to the Rhone has led some to propose an origin in Gaul; scholars are divided. She comes, at any rate, "from the ends of the earth," from the perspective of the bishop of Edessa! (REF)

¹² Hagith Sivan, "Holy Land Pilgrimage and Western Audiences: Some Reflections on Egeria and Her Circle," *CQ* 38 (1988), 528-35.

¹³ Readers are divided as to Egeria's intellectual ability. Mary Campbell calls her "clearly a woman of average intelligence," "the most naïve of writers" (*The Witness*, 23; 8) and her first translator found Egeria's Latin so bad it barely deserved to be translated (J.H. Bernard, *The Pilgrimage of St. Silvia of Aquitania* [London: 1891], 9). Another however found her style "epic" (L. Spitzer, "The Epic Style of the Pilgrim Aetheria" in *Comparative Literature I* [1949], both cited in John Wilkinson, *Egeria's Travels* [3rd ed.; Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1999] 2) and Valerius, of course, saw in her account a profound spiritual depth. Her narrative is extremely effective precisely in its simplicity and use of repetition; what appears to be credulity is in her terms an insistence on the double witness, the truth-speaking, of Scripture and land.

afford a three-year journey, wealthy enough to hire horses and camels and keep a retinue; important enough to be greeted by bishops everywhere she goes.

But Egeria is not interested in the facts of her own life. She has one consuming passion: *desiderium meum*, my desire, she calls it. She desires to trace on the land of Palestine and Egypt and Mesopotamia the stories of the Holy Scriptures. She wants to be shown the very place – *locus ille* – where it all happened, where God spoke to Moses out of the burning bush, the tomb of Job, the river where John the Baptist baptized. She walks in the footsteps of the patriarchs and prophets and apostles, in the places they walked. The journey she describes is their journey, the history she tells is their history, as she herself walks and tells it. Her history as distinguished from the biblical narrative, current events, local customs, politics on the edges of a weakening Roman empire, the daily life of a busy city like Jerusalem – none of this interests her. If this is travel literature, it is travel literature with a difference: it traces neither contemporary points of interest nor the (inner or outer) life of its protagonist, but rather the ancient stories of the Bible, particularly (in the ms. as we have it), the great story of the Exodus. It is to these stories, and not to the logic of travel or the unrolling life of its author, that it owes its narrative character.

Egeria's emphasis on the biblical stories is typical of Christian travel accounts of the period. The pilgrim of Bordeaux, Jerome, Paula (through Jerome), all describe not the contemporary landscape, but the sites of Scripture – or rather, they describe the contemporary landscape in terms of the events of Scripture. So Jerome, writing (on behalf of Paula and Eustochium) to Marcella to persuade her to join them on pilgrimage in Jerusalem recounts the sights they will see: “We shall see Lazarus come forth bound with grave clothes, we shall look upon the waters of Jordan purified for the washing of the Lord. Thence we shall pass to the folds of the shepherds, we shall pray together in the mausoleum of David. We shall see the prophet, Amos, upon his crag blowing his shepherd's horn.”¹⁴ So also (though with less imagination) the Bordeaux Pilgrim, whose account of his pilgrimage roughly 50 years before Egeria (in 333) is one long list of biblical places and people: “[Near Jericho] is the sycamore tree which Zacchaeus climbed in order that he could see Christ. A mile and a half from the city is the spring of the prophet Elisha; ... And above the spring is the house of Rahab the harlot.”¹⁵ The biblical focus here, as in Egeria, is emphatic.

Yet Egeria goes beyond these accounts. In Paula and the Pilgrim, biblical references are jumbled together higgledy-piggledy in rich confusion; no *story* ever emerges. Egeria, however, gives us a narrative: “Meanwhile, as we walked on, we arrived at a certain place where those mountains between which we were going began to open out and make an infinite valley, huge, utterly level and very beautiful, and across the valley there appeared the holy mountain of God, Sinai. Now this place, where the mountains opened out, is next to that place where the ‘Graves of Craving’ are.”(1.1)¹⁶

¹⁴ Jerome, *Ep.* 46.13, trans. W.H. Fremantle in *Jerome: Letters and Select Works (Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff and H. Wace; 2nd Series; Vol. 6; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1995), 65.

¹⁵ *Itinerarium Burdigalense* 596-7, quoted and translated in John Wilkinson, *Egeria's Travels* (3rd ed.; Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1999), 32.

¹⁶ *It. Eg.* 1.1, SC 296. I have been aided in my translations of Egeria's Latin by Pierre Maraval's wonderful French translation in Maraval, ed., *Egérie*. Where Maraval and John Wilkinson differ, I find Maraval usually more accurate. “Graves of Craving,” however, is Wilkinson's phrase, excellent in its echo of the NRSV translation of Num 11.34.

Immediately the story takes shape: this is that journey bounded by the “graves of craving” and the ascent of Sinai, the journey of the Israelites through the wilderness to the mountain of God, journey of both divine blessing and human temptation told in Exodus and Numbers and here called forth by “this place.” Unlike the pilgrim from Bordeaux, Egeria does not promptly abandon the story thus intimated, but develops it in great detail. In the next 12 chapters we walk with her as she traces on that plain and at that mountain the history of the Israelites, from the burning bush to the glory of God descending on Mt. Sinai (though in reverse order!), their sojourn in Egypt and their sojourn in the desert, all the way, finally, to Mt. Nebo.

The narrative unfolds not only in macrocosm – the whole course of the Exodus – but also in its details. Coming back across the plain Egeria walks through the episode of the golden calf: “They showed us the place where the camps of the children of Israel were, in those days when Moses was on the mountain. They showed us also the place where that calf was made; for in that place is fixed even today a large stone. We also, as we were going along, saw far off the summit of the mountain which looks out over that whole valley, from which place holy Moses saw the children of Israel dancing in those days when they made the calf. They showed also the huge rock in the very place where holy Moses descended with Joshua son of Nave, the rock on which ‘enraged, he broke the tablets’ (Ex. 32:19) which he was carrying” (*It. Eg.* 5.3-4). The story goes on – she sees the place where Moses ordered the sons of Levi “to run from door to door” with the sword of retribution, the place where the calf was burnt, the river from which Moses made the children of Israel drink the ashes of the calf. In her narration, she weaves phrases straight out of the Old Latin of Exodus (and Numbers and Deuteronomy) together with her own telescoped telling of the story; the result is a kind of walking paraphrase of Scripture. Each separate landmark is molded into a narrative whole; Exodus 32 unfolds before her eyes (and ours) and the apostasy of Israel comes alive on the plain. Seen through the lens of Scripture, the land yields the biblical story.

There is, too, a narrative immediacy. Whereas the Pilgrim from Bordeaux describes each site in terms of a biblical event clearly belonging to the past, Egeria so salts her narrative with the actions and words of the biblical story as to erode the distinction between the past of the story and the present telling of it. God speaks in the present tense to Moses from the burning bush at the moment when Egeria stands on that ancient holy ground (4.7; 5.2); God speaks to Elijah at the cave on Mt. Horeb (4.2) and to Abraham at Harran (20.1); struck by a desire to see Mt. Nebo, Egeria quotes God’s direction to Moses: “Climb the mountain of Arabot, Mt. Nebo... (Deut. 32.49-50);” (*It. Eg.* 10.1). Egeria has, in the previous sentence, discovered by the will of God (*iubente Deo*) her own wish to go to Mt. Nebo; when she climbs it she sees all the lands God has just told Moses he will see. Thus the words of God to Moses become the word of God to Egeria, as the biblical past and her present journey collapse into one.

In this vividness she differs both from the Pilgrim and Jerome/Paula. Even when the Pilgrim quotes the words of Elisha (*It. Burd.* 596) or Jesus (590) there is no elision of their words and his pilgrimage: the biblical words are securely bounded by the past tense of the episode within which they fall. He sees the place where the biblical story once happened. But in Egeria, the biblical story happens now once more, in her journey’s tracing of it. Something like this happens also in Paula and Jerome’s pilgrimage accounts. They see in the places of the Holy Land the biblical events in the present tense: Lazarus

comes forth bound; Amos blows his horn. Georgia Frank notes the “realism” of this account, the way in which “the eye of faith” closes the gap between present and past, a development, she suggests, of the later 4th century that contrasts with the Bordeaux Pilgrim’s secure distance from the biblical past.¹⁷ Egeria, some 20 years earlier, shows already Paula/Jerome’s elision of past and present – but she goes further. For where Paula sees the biblical event with the “eye of faith,” Egeria actually walks in it. In Paula’s letter, the concrete present, the place itself, nearly disappears behind the story it recalls.

In this sense Paula and Jerome’s account is *less* realistic than that of either Egeria or the Pilgrim. The Pilgrim, though he does not see Zacchaeus, sees (350 years later) the very tree Zacchaeus climbed. Paula sees Amos on the crag, but the crag itself is not much in evidence. There is in her description of the holy land a thrust toward the inner experience of faith: “Will the day never come when we shall together enter the Saviour’s cave, and together weep in the sepulcher of the Lord with His sister and with His mother?” she says to Marcella (Jerome, *Epist.* 46.13; trans. Fremantle). She and her companions find in the cave at Bethlehem and in all the sites around Jerusalem not “the very spot on which Moses stood,” but a spiritual experience of the Saviour: “Wounded with the Saviour’s shaft, we shall say one to another: ‘I have found Him whom my soul loveth; I will hold Him and will not let Him go’” (*ibid.*) This is not far from Gregory of Nyssa, who, as E.D. Hunt notes, in his own travels through the holy land saw in the sites not *res ipsa*, but symbols of Christian salvation, an analogy to Christian life.¹⁸ For Gregory the place itself has become primarily a pointer to its spiritual or allegorical meaning; where Paula finds the holy places precious as a stimulus to the inner experience of Christ, Gregory discourages the practice of pilgrimage altogether – it is not the place that matters, but the personal drama of salvation to which the places (Bethlehem, Golgotha, the empty tomb) point.¹⁹

Even Jerome, himself a pilgrim and settler in the holy land and, in the letter to Marcella, apparently keenly supportive of Paula’s site-induced devotion, later de-emphasizes the holy places: it is not the earthly Jerusalem but the heavenly which the believer is to seek, for God is not limited to “a narrow strip of earth;” indeed, “the spots which witnessed the crucifixion and the resurrection profit those only who bear their several crosses, who day by day rise again with Christ....” Jerusalem, now a busy city with all the vices of a city, may in fact be a positive detriment to Paulinus’ young faith (*Ep.* 58, trans. Fremantle). Here, as in Gregory, the focus is on the life of Christian virtue; the holy places are useful as symbols of and stimuli to holy living.

¹⁷ Georgia Frank, *The Memory of the Eyes: Pilgrims to Living Saints in Christian Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 107.

¹⁸ *Ep.* 3; E.D. Hunt, *Holy Land Pilgrimage*, 88; cf. Robert Wilkens, *The Land Called Holy: Palestine in Christian History and Thought* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), 117-118. But Gregory, as Wilkens notes, still finds the sign itself, as well as what it signifies, important: the holy places are “palpable reminders that God once walked this earth;” they “bear the imprint of ‘life itself’” (117).

¹⁹ Hunt, *ibid.* See also Frank, *Memory*, 84-88. Frank notes that even Gregory, who wishes to de-literalize the pilgrim’s journey toward God, cannot resist corporeal language: Moses (whose ascent of Sinai serves as a metaphor for the soul’s ascent to God) nevertheless seeks to meet God “face to face” (*V. Moyses* 232; Frank 88). There is here a faint echo of Egeria’s insistence on the place itself, the physical and corporeal, an echo which Frank emphasizes; this corporeality is central to Frank’s (fascinating) discussion of pilgrimage to the living – to the desert saints in whom one may, through the ‘memory of the eyes,’ meet God face to face. See further below, pp. 13-14.

Egeria, by contrast, insists (with the Bordeaux Pilgrim) on *res ipsa*, the thing itself. It is the place, *locus ille*, that calls forth the Exodus story: there is the bush where God spoke to Moses, “the bush which even today still will live and put out blossoms” (4.6) and there is the place in front of it where Moses stood when God said to him, “Put off your sandals for the place on which you stand is holy ground;” (5.2) there “even today” is the stone where the Israelites worshipped the calf (5.3); there is the very river from which Moses made the Israelites drink (5.6). The narrative emerges from the place where it happened – the land tells the story.

The narrative power of the land is such that its contours describe the story even when it does not make sense. When Egeria travels from Clysma to “the land of Goshen” she seeks to follow in reverse the route of the Israelites from Egypt to the Red Sea. “I wish Your Affection may believe me,” she tells her sisters. “As far as I could see, the children of Israel walked in such a way that, as far as they went right, so far they returned to the left; as far as they went ahead afresh, so far they went back again ...!” (7.3) The route of the Israelites follows the landmarks, willy-nilly.

Indeed, if the land witnesses to something that is not in Scripture, it is simply added to the biblical account. Egeria wonders how the tombs of Nahor and Bethuel can stand outside the city of Haran: “I have not read [in the Scriptures] when Nahor and Bethuel moved to this place,” she says to the bishop of that city, a man “very learned in the Scriptures.” The bishop admits that the “Scripture of the canon (*Scriptura canonis*)” does not say when they came, but manifestly they did come: here are their tombs, just a mile from the city (20.10). Similarly, sites connected by legend to the life of Jesus have scriptural authenticity. In the city of Edessa Egeria sees the palace of King Abgar, and in it a spring of water like a stream of silver and full of fish such as she has never seen, so beautiful are they, so colourful and delicious. These are the streams, the bishop tells her, created by divine fiat when Abgar’s city was besieged by the Persians, who cut off the water supply. Taking a letter from Jesus himself in his hand, Abgar, who believed in Jesus before he saw him, prayed for the Lord Jesus’ help. Immediately the fountains “which you see *in eo loco*,” Egeria relates, sprang up and still flow today (19.8-12).

Conversely, on the one occasion when Egeria fails to find the physical marker of a biblical story she is gravely disappointed: looking out over the valley where Sodom stood she sees the place where Lot’s wife turned into a pillar of salt, the place spoken of in Scripture – “but believe me, venerable ladies, the pillar itself now no longer appears.... Certainly we saw the place, but we saw no pillar; I cannot deceive you about this matter” (12.7). The bush and the spring, the graves and the missing column, matter: they are the physical presence that anchors story in the world and world in the story.

This emphasis on the place, the thing, is often treated by scholars as a literal or historicizing tendency typical of pre-critical readings of the Bible – the holy places as “visible witness to historical events;”²⁰ the self-evidently literal meaning of the bible necessarily implying “actual historical occurrences.”²¹ But a historicizing tendency does not in itself explain the marriage, in Egeria, of place and story, the way in which the landmarks yield a narrative through which Egeria walks, the capacity of the biblical

²⁰ Hunt, *Holy Land Pilgrimage*, 89.

²¹ Frei, *Eclipse*, 2. Frei is speaking of the narrative and typological reading of Scripture. He does not, as far as I can see, take into account the impact of the land, the place itself, on the reading of Scripture.

narrative in conjunction with the place itself to “render the world.”²² ‘Place’ described in the biblical narrative and encountered in travel becomes present to Egeria as ‘holiness,’ as does the land defined by its places. It is not just that the land guarantees the historical truth of the story. It is that the land in Egeria is fraught with significance, in itself. From the manuscript’s opening lines, the land shines with meaning: the mountains “open out;” the valley is “infinite, huge, utterly level and very beautiful;” and there across the valley appears the holy mountain of God. The land has the character of revelation. *Hic est locus ille*; this is the place – Egeria makes of the phrase a refrain whose solemn repetition (often three-fold) has almost ritual force.

Georgia Frank recognizes the significance of the concrete, of physical reality in the 4th century pilgrim’s journey. She focuses on faces rather than places – pilgrimage to living saints, the holy hermits of the desert – but notes in the corporeal the same revelatory power Egeria gives to place. The holy face, she suggests, reveals to the eyes of the 4th century pilgrim the soul, reveals even the prophet or saint of old.²³ Indeed, the face communicates to the eyes of the pilgrim its holiness. “What the eye sees it appropriates,” a Coptic preacher declared; for the ancients sight had a haptic power that allowed the seer to grasp the object of her vision.²⁴ For the pilgrim, that vision reached into the holy face of the living saint to touch the holiness of the biblical past. The corporeal has its power finally in the eye of the beholder – but it is precisely as “face,” as the physical and concrete that it has that power.

For Egeria it is not to sight alone that the land reveals its meaning: it is, equally, to touch and hearing. It is as Egeria walks through the land, with her footfall, that the land opens to her the Scriptures, and almost as often as she is shown the place, she is told the story: for every second *ostenderunt* there is a *dicunt*; “tunc dicta est michi,” she says; “haec audivi,” “ait sanctus presbyter.” The sensory in all its aspects is important: not, as Frank suggests, because the beholder is at the centre of all sacred encounters,²⁵ but because the sacred is encountered in this place itself, in the holy land and in the face and voice of the holy. Gregory of Nyssa, of all people, he who sought to downplay the place and the journey that seeks it, even he recognizes the holiness of place. The holy places of the land of Palestine, he says, are signs pointing to God precisely because God in Christ has walked there; they have “received the footprints of Life itself.”²⁶

In her lively sense of the land’s luminosity, Egeria stands in a long Judaeo-Christian tradition. From the beauty of the garden of Eden, to God’s promise to Abraham of a good land and the people’s entry into a land flowing with milk and honey, to Ezekiel’s crowning vision of paradise regained, four rivers teeming with fish flowing from a restored and majestic temple at the centre of the world, the land – and eventually the particular place Jerusalem -- is in Scripture the place of God’s blessing, the place that

²² *Ibid*, 3.

²³ Frank, *Memory*, 137-170.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 121-133; quotation from Pseudo-Shenoute, *On Christian Behaviour* 40.7, Frank 131. Sight “was a form of physical contact between the viewer and the object. For the pilgrim, that gaze extended to the sacred past” (133).

²⁵ Frank, *Memory*, 180. This seems to me a very 21st century conclusion to an otherwise excellent study of ancient ways of seeing in relation to pilgrimage.

²⁶ *Ep.* 3.4, cited in Wilkens, *Land Called Holy*, 117.

suffers under God's wrath, the place of the people's final hope.²⁷ This hope is still articulated in the NT: in Matthew it is to the holy city that the holy ones go (in a proleptic resurrection) at the gospel's climactic moment; for Luke it is in Jerusalem that the gift of the Holy Spirit is given; for Paul it is essential to gather the offering of the gentiles in to Jerusalem, even at the cost of his life. And, of course, Jesus (as the story is told in the synoptics) makes the journey to Jerusalem the culmination of his ministry. The land of Israel, and then Jerusalem, is finally the place in which God meets his people, in the temple and then (for the NT writers) in the Christ. The land, this land, is the place of the presence of God. It is this that informs Gregory of Nyssa's reluctant recognition of the power of the holy places: they bear the imprint of "life itself."²⁸

If the centrality of the land of promise gave way in the early church, in the days of Roman persecution, to the vision of a heavenly city of God, the victory and conversion of Constantine allowed a focus on the land to flourish again.²⁹ And flourish it did. From the time of Constantine's mother Helena, through Eusebius and Melania and Jerome and Paula and Marcella and the younger Melania, well into the 5th century, there was an explosion of Christian pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Egeria is part of this movement, the new (and ancient) excitement about the land itself, the place of God's presence and promises. It is this essentially scriptural instinct for the sacredness of the land, as much as it is the materiality of ancient theories of sight, which informs Egeria's passion for the land and the vividness with which it speaks in her travel narrative. For Egeria,

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil....³⁰

Therefore the valley is infinite and very beautiful, the river flows like silver and the fish flash with colour, orchards teem with fruit and food grows even in the desert.

One scholar has said that Egeria travels through a Utopia.³¹ But it is not a Utopia that Egeria describes. It is a real land touched by the presence of God, by the history of God's saving acts, and made beautiful. When Egeria travels through the land of Goshen, land given by Pharaoh to the Israelites and said by Pharaoh to be the best land in Egypt, she finds a land of extraordinary fertility, full of vineyards and orchards and perfectly cultivated fields and the best gardens – "what more can I say," she asks? "I think I have never seen a more beautiful land" (9.4). When she arrives at "a valley quite beautiful and pleasant," *vallem pulchram satis et amenam*, abounding with vines and trees, she asks, seeing that it is so pleasing, what place this is. It is, she is told, the place called "Opu Melchisedech" – 'where Melchisedek' offered bread and wine to God (13.3-4). She sees, in the beauty of the place, that God has touched the land: the scriptural story confirms and unfolds God's presence, the meeting with God, in this place. This is the place "where," as even its name records, and the land itself bears witness.

²⁷ On the centrality of the holy land in the Hebrew Scriptures and then in Christian piety, and especially for the significance of Jerusalem in Ezekiel and in Jesus' ministry, see Wilkens, *Land Called Holy*, esp. 1-51; 101-126.

²⁸ Wilkens, *Land Called Holy*, 117.

²⁹ So Hunt, *Holy Land Pilgrimage*, 1-27; Wilkens, *Land Called Holy*, 85-88.

³⁰ Gerard Manley Hopkins, "God's Grandeur," ll.1-2.

³¹ Zwi Malachi, "The Narrative of Egeria's Travels," in *La Narrativa Christiana Antica: codici narrativi, strutture formali, schemi retorici* (Studia Ephemeridis Augustinianum 50; Rome: Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum, 1995), 501-506, here 504-505.

This sense of divine encounter ‘flaming out’ from the land pervades the narrative. Everywhere she goes she sees the footprints of God, just as the history of God’s acts is told in Scripture. And as she walks in the places where God has acted, her journey becomes a journey into the presence of God. The scriptural moment and her present moment coincide on the holy land. In the plain where the Israelites sojourned (*commorati sunt*) “in those days when holy Moses ‘ascended the mountain’ of the Lord”(Ex. 24:18; 2.2), the holy monks now dwell: *commorabantur* (3.1) – the same word describes both. Where once manna appeared in the desert, now Egeria receives *eulogia*, blessings, from the monks – fruit they have grown contrary to all expectation in the dry earth. And as Moses ascended the mountain into the glory of God, so Egeria now ascends.

It is in the ascent of Sinai that the character of journey as transformation, the pilgrim’s participation in the sacred story at the holy places, comes through most clearly. The transformation occurs through a conjunction of biblical narrative and the power of the place itself. As Egeria approaches Sinai, she quotes Scripture. “This is the place (*est hic locus*) where *descendit maiestas Dei* in the days of Moses, as it is written” (Ex. 24:16; *It. Eg.* 1.5). Three times she repeats this phrase as she approaches the mountain, placing her own journey within the context of the journey of Israel. The words of Exodus serve to recall the glory of God upon the mountain in the time of Moses. At the same time, however, the glory of God is revealed upon the mountain in the time of Egeria, and it is the mountain itself that reveals it. This mountain, *ubi descendit maiestas Dei* (where the glory of God descended 2.5) is marvelously high: so much higher than all the rest that they look like little hills from its summit. But although this mountain, *in quo descendit maiestas Dei* (2.6), is so high, Egeria says, this is what is amazing: it cannot be seen from below, even before the ascent. For those who have climbed it, however, it appears by the grace of God in all its glory, even from below. So her holy guides have told her, and so she discovers for herself. Now the place itself becomes the locus of spiritual transformation: the glory of God steps out of the Book of Exodus and descends upon the mountain even now, and the pilgrim’s eyes are opened.

Egeria’s description of the ascent makes the point. It is a hard journey: straight up the outlying mountains and straight down again, on foot because it is too steep and stony for a mount. Sinai itself is the highest and rockiest of all; she climbs it only “with Christ our God willing, helped by the prayers of the holy men who accompanied us, and with great labour.” The mountain in its steep and rocky slopes embodies the struggle of the human ascent to God. But, she tells her sisters, “I did not feel the pain,” “because the desire which I have had, God willing I saw being fulfilled” (3.2). Reaching the summit, she quotes Exodus again: “the law was given on [this mountain]; it is the place ‘where the glory of God descended’ in that day on which the mountain smoked” (3.2). At that moment she sees a church on the summit of the mountain. And behold! *Ecce!* There coming to meet her is a priest, a whole multitude of priests, from their dwellings below – for no one lives on the top of the mountain – and there on the mountain-top where the glory of God descended they read the book of Moses and celebrate the Eucharist. Afterwards the holy men show her the world from the top of the mountain. So high is the mountain that from it she can see Egypt, Palestine, the Red Sea and the Mediterranean, and the endless lands of the Saracens. It is scarcely to be believed, she writes – indeed,

the commentators do not believe her!³² The point, however, is clear. This is a mountain of marvels now as it was in the time of Moses; even now it is touched by the glory of God and Egeria herself is transformed.

The mountain, then, is the place where the glory of God made known to Egeria in Scripture meets her in the flesh. This is the impetus for pilgrimage: though the world is formed by the biblical story, that story names the world the place of the presence of God. It names God present in particular places, in particular moments and particular saving acts. Egeria, and her age, takes the story seriously, and so her passionate desire is to be in the places where God has met the world face to face. When she has found those places her every desire, *omne desiderium*, is, as she tells her beloved sisters, fulfilled. It is not that the place proves the story to be true – Egeria makes no distinction between the biblical narrative and what we now call history, meaning by this term events that have a kind of objective reality, that stand on their own outside any narrative, biblical or otherwise.³³ She takes it for granted that the story is true, in every sense of the word. The place is where she *meets* the story, and the God who is its subject; on Mt. Sinai the biblical narrative and her own life come together: *descendit maiestas Dei*. So her journey has finally the character of worship.

And so the arrival at each place, the moment of conjunction with the action of God, is marked by prayer and bible reading, and, at the top of Sinai, by the Eucharist. At the beginning of our narrative, when Egeria first sees Sinai in the distance, her holy guides (*deductores sancti*) say, “It is the custom that prayer be offered here by those who come, since from this place for the first time the mountain of God is seen” (1.2). When she reaches the summit of the mountain, *ecce!* A priest appears, and Egeria celebrates with her holy companions the Eucharist. The liturgical drive of the narrative is inescapable: at each place she reads with the holy monks and priests who are there the bible reading appropriate to that place; the narrative’s climactic moment, on Sinai, culminates in a Eucharist, and the work as a whole moves from the journey through the desert to Jerusalem, and the cycle of Holy Week services celebrated there. That the walk through the holy stories and holy places is followed by a walk through the liturgies of Holy Week in Jerusalem is, as Dubois has suggested,³⁴ not accidental: the liturgical celebration of the Passion of Christ in Jerusalem – each moment in the story marked and read at the place where it happened; the crowd moving in procession from site to site and drawn into the moment to such a degree that its groans and tears at the story of Judas’ betrayal, on Maundy Thursday, at the Mt. of Olives, drown out the reader’s voice – is the complement of the journey through the land and story of the Exodus in the Sinai desert. In the intense liturgical drama of the Jerusalem Holy Week celebrations, Egeria’s own intertwining of Scripture and land in pilgrimage is seen to be the common impulse of the

³² Dubois (*Pèlerinage*, 65) makes the interesting suggestion that Egeria’s view here spans salvation history, from Sinai to Alexandria, from the exodus of the Israelites to the capital of Egyptian Christianity. The Christians become the direct successors of the people of Israel in the desert; pilgrimage serves to join in one place past and present (and appropriate the past). He believes Egeria constructs the view; Egeria, however, reports that she really sees it, as her guides describe it to her. Here, I suggest, is another indication of the power, the infinite possibility of the holy place – from this mountain on which the glory of God descends, now as in the day of Moses, it is indeed possible to see the whole span of God’s saving acts, revealed by the world.

³³ See Frei, *Eclipse*, especially the *Introduction*, for this point.

³⁴ Dubois, *Pèlerinage*, 67.

time. It is the biblical narrative, the narrative of the passion in this case, that shapes the Holy Week journey – but it is precisely a journey, a movement through the places where God acted, to Golgotha and finally the empty tomb. Liturgy is pilgrimage, and pilgrimage liturgy, because it seeks the place itself. *Hic est locus ille*; and in that place the traveler finds the presence of God.

Jonathan Z. Smith notes the convergence of place and ritual time in the Holy Week liturgies in Egeria's Jerusalem. He suggests that the development of a liturgical cycle marking the moments of the Christian story, a development that occurred in the walk through the holy places of Jerusalem, enabled that story to be transported outside the places where it first happened, so that even the inhabitants of far-flung Spain could share in it as if they too walked in the footsteps of Jesus.³⁵ The point, for our purposes, is that it was precisely in the places where it first happened that the story was celebrated, and the liturgy developed. Ritual time was dependent on holy place. The walk through the places themselves – pilgrimage, in effect -- structured the liturgy, and gave rise to a cycle of worship marking the moments of God's action that could make that walk accessible to Christians everywhere. Liturgy and pilgrimage were two sides of a single instinct: to follow the story in the places where it touched the earth, and there to meet God. Gregory of Nyssa insists on the power of the place: for there are the footprints of God. But he, like Jerome, insists also that God is not contained by any place – we worship “in spirit and in truth”:³⁶ and so the worship founded in the walk through the holy places steps outside the holy places, and makes the meeting with God possible in all the world. This reach of the holy place beyond itself is, finally, the effect of Egeria's letter. In her narrative's vivid evocation of the holy places, and in its finally liturgical drive, she offers to her sisters at the ends of the earth a share in the presence of God. Her minute description of her journey renders the holy places for them – and then journey becomes liturgy, and pilgrimage a worship in which they too may share. We see in Egeria, and in the passion for pilgrimage and pilgrimage-shaped worship so characteristic of her century, that intertwining of holy story and holy land that lies at the heart of the lasting liturgy of the church.

³⁵ Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 74-95, esp. 92-95. Of the Jerusalem holy week services described by Egeria he says, with characteristic insight, “This is worship as pilgrimage” (94). I would simply add that Egeria's journey is pilgrimage as worship, and the two – her journey and the Jerusalem liturgy – are the complementary outworkings of a single impulse to which the land as holy place is central

³⁶ Jerome, *Ep.* 58.3