“Usually Destroyed… Usually Rebuilt”

Aldous Huxley’s Jerusalem Visit, 1955

By Elise Aghazarian



A stone in Jerusalem. Photo Sophie Shiber.

When in 1955, British writer Aldous Huxley walked through Jerusalem with a Palestinian refugee, the latter’s repeated use of the word “usually” in the context of monuments and edifices struck the writer as a symbol of history, memory, and culture: the city’s stones and monuments bear witness to cycles of power, destruction, reconstruction, and the power of culture to foster resilience.

A few years after the *Nakba*, the British writer Aldous Huxley (1894–1963) – best known for Brave New World and Ends and Means – walked through Jerusalem led by a Palestinian refugee. These reflections were later published in an essay on his Jerusalem visit, written in 1955. As scenes of destruction from Gaza and other cities across the region fill our screens, I often find myself returning to Huxley’s observations. In his dystopian fiction and nonfiction reflections, Huxley consistently critiques how systems of power – political, technological, and economic – normalize destruction, social engineering, violence, and control while evading moral responsibility. This is relevant to look back on in our times. In his lesser-known essay on Jerusalem, published in Encounter in 1955, these concerns unfold through his encounter with the city and its living stones, shaped by a moment of trauma.

Huxley begins his essay on Jerusalem by presenting his Jerusalemite guide, whose name he leaves unmentioned, against the backdrop of a historical moment marked by political fracture and uncertainty: “Our guide through the labyrinthine streets of Jerusalem was a young Christian refugee from the other side of the wall which now divides the ancient city from the new, the non-viable state of Jordan from the non-viable state of Israel.”

Huxley’s narration is often symbolic, though at times tinged with the mockery and claimed judgment characteristic of some Western travelers to Jerusalem. The guide functions as a mediating figure within this narrative stance: both an object of observation and a conduit through which the fractured political landscape is rendered legible to the reader. In several passages, Huxley turns his attention closely to the guide himself, whose melancholy seems to echo both the city’s atmosphere and the lived reality of Palestinian refugees in the period: “He was a sad, embittered young man – and well he might be. His prospects had been blighted, his family reduced from comparative wealth to the most abject penury, their house and land taken away from them, their bank account frozen and devaluated. In the circumstances, the surprising thing was not his bitterness, but the melancholy resignation with which it was tempered.”

This melancholy led Huxley to refer to his guide as a “sad young man.” He lingers on this sadness, using it to reflect on a somber and often obscure reality. Walking through what he described as the “brown, dry squalor” of the Old City of Jerusalem and listening to his “young friend,” as he also called him, he recalls being overwhelmed by what he called an “organic realization” – not merely by the persistence of human suffering, but by an immediate, instinctive sense of it.

In contrast to traditional tourists, trapped in their fantasies, he mentions that he sees significance in angles with vital significance, as opposed to the nonviable states dividing the city, adding: “There are tourists whose greatest pleasure is a trip through historical associations and their own fancy. I am not one of them. When I travel, I like to move among intrinsically significant objects, not through an absence peopled only by literary references.”

Huxley’s desire to look beyond monuments and into the city’s “living stones,” together with the guide’s melodramatic character, leads him to observe children, porters, and pilgrims. Yet he remains particularly fixed on the figure of the guide himself. He describes

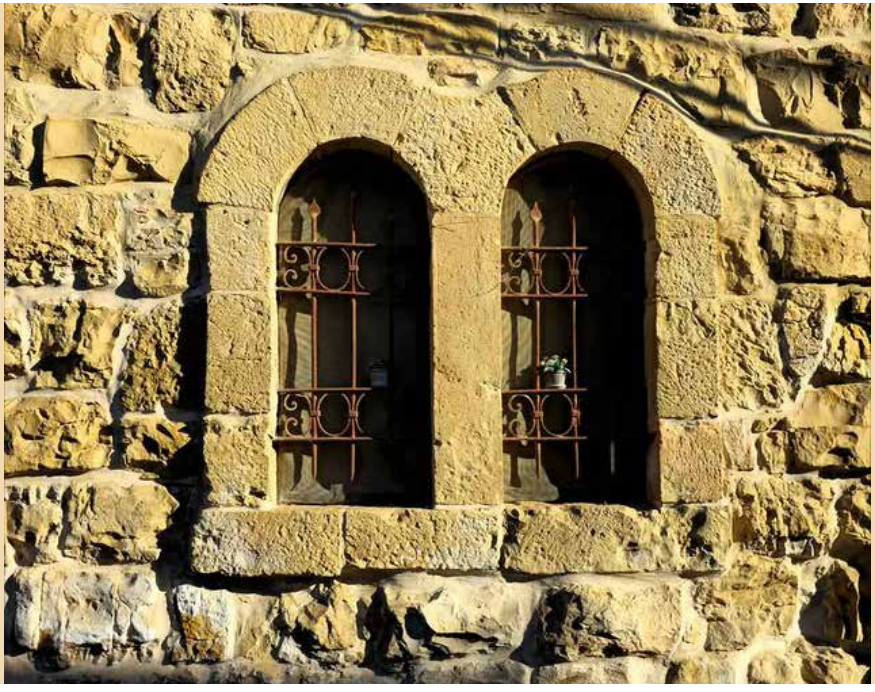
him as "far too conscientious," and of sparing no detail in his explanations.

They visit St. Anne's, St. James's, the Dome of the Rock, the Temple Mount, and the Wailing Wall – where, at the time, Jews were unable to pray because Jerusalem was divided – along with other sites associated with Anglican, Coptic, and French institutions. Throughout these encounters, Huxley appears less concerned with cataloguing monuments than with existential questions and the human presence that gives the city its meaning.

According to Huxley, the guide had a "significant contribution to colloquial English (and, at the same time, to the science and art of history)" through the insertion of the word "usually" into "almost every sentence." On every site, the guide explains how it was constructed by one power, then destroyed by another, only to be "usually" reconstructed.

This drives Huxley to reflect on the way the city seems trapped in a cycle: usually destroyed, then usually rebuilt, only to be destroyed and rebuilt again. In that single, repeated word – "usually" – he reflects on history as condensed into a "four-syllabled rhythm."

"On every site, the guide explains how it was constructed by one power, then destroyed by another power, only to be 'usually' reconstructed."



A house built in stone in Ein Karem.

As he tours the city and observes the people, Huxley recalls wars and mass killings, and reflects on the passage of time and shifting demographics. He draws analogies between past and present, only to realize that mass atrocities are now occurring on a far larger scale. "The Mongols had only horses as transport, only bows and spears and butchers' knives for weapons; if they had possessed our machinery, they could have depopulated the planet. As it was, they had to be content with small triumphs – the slaughter of only a few millions."

Huxley, a pacifist political critic, when hearing the story of the Jewish exile to Babylon at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar, reflects on the present moment in the early 1950s: "Compared with the forced migrations of our time, the "Exile" was the most trivial affair. How many millions were uprooted by Hitler and the Communists? How many more millions were driven out of Pakistan into India, out of India into Pakistan? How many hundreds of thousands had to flee, with our young guide, from their homes in Israel? By the waters of Babylon, ten thousand at the most sat down and wept. In the single refugee camp at Bethlehem there are more exiles than that. And Bethlehem's is only one of dozens of such camps scattered far and wide over the Near East."

He expects catastrophes and crimes to multiply, transforming the universe into "private hells." Advanced technology, he believes, will enable fewer people to do more harm to greater numbers than ever before. He also reflects on human misery, hunger, and malnutrition. Some of these elements are sadly to say a reality in our world today, around 70 years later.

In some passages, Huxley follows the guide's example with a hint of sarcasm, though his observations are occasionally tinged with the top-down, judgmental perspective typical of Western travelers to Jerusalem. "But meanwhile here we were in Jerusalem, looking at the usually destroyed antiquities and rubbing shoulders with the usually poverty-stricken inhabitants, the usually superstitious pilgrims."

As the guide leads him to St. James Armenian Cathedral, Huxley lingers on

From Babylon to the Bethlehem refugee camp, Huxley exposes how technology and politics have magnified human suffering on an unprecedented scale.



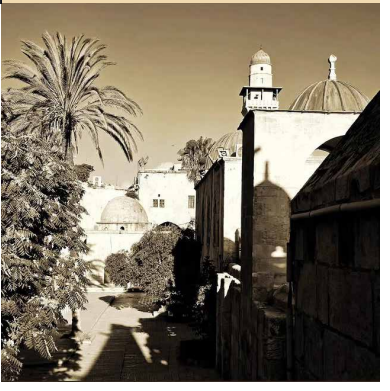
Photo by Sophie Shiber.



An alley in the Old City in Jerusalem.

The Old City of Jerusalem.





the sound of a pianist in one of the surrounding houses, playing the opening fantasia of Bach's Partita in D minor. The music lifts his spirits: "In all Jerusalem it was the only oasis of cheerfulness. And not alone of cheerfulness. As we came out into the courtyard, through which the visitor must approach the church's main entrance, we heard a strange and wonderful sound."

Huxley reflects on the moment, seeking meaning and guidance: "The ordered torrent of bright pure notes went streaming out over the city's immemorial squalor. Art and religion, philosophy and science, morals and politics – these are the instruments by means of which men have tried to discover a coherence in the flux of events, to impose an order on the chaos of experience."

He contemplates how music, memory, mass violence, and human resilience intertwine. Even amid tragedy, music offers a sense of transcendence: "Music transfigures the mortal lapse through time into the symbol, into the very fact, of a more than human life! A tunnel of joy and understanding had been driven through chaos." Huxley introduces this reflection just before mentioning his guide's reference to the "Armenian massacres." In his view, "perpetual perishing is also perpetual creation." He describes music as a device "working directly upon this experience of time," adding: "Usually destroyed but also, and just as often, usually rebuilt. Like the rain, like sunshine, like the grace of God and the devastations of Nature."

In his own way, Huxley conveys a distinctive aesthetic and worldview, expressed through his experience of Jerusalem: "Jerusalem, of course, contains much more than ghosts and architectural monstrosities. Besides being one of the most profoundly depressing of the earth's cities, it is one of the strangest and, in its way, one of the most beautiful."

As a Jerusalemite, I dedicate these words to all the cities and villages of the region that have endured the past years. History reminds us that time moves in ebbs and flows: empires rise and fall, cities are destroyed and rebuilt. From the shadows of ruin, new life emerges, like a phoenix. In the meantime, culture, like music and dance, helps us transcend and connect to our essence.

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Elise Aghazarian is a sociologist, writer, and translator from the Armenian Quarter of Jerusalem. She specializes in topics related to cultural history, social psychology, social politics, and the Arabic language.