

Consensus

Volume 33
Issue 2 *Theology and Context(s)*

Article 3

11-25-2011

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Recommended Citation

Pryce, Rick (2011) "Gethsemane – A Theology of Place," *Consensus*: Vol. 33: Iss. 2, Article 3.

DOI: 10.51644/VBPH9709

Available at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol33/iss2/3>

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Gethsemane – A Theology of Place

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Introduction

This paper arises from my experiences on a tour to Israel and Palestine sponsored by Waterloo Lutheran Seminary in April-May, 2009. The purpose of that trip was, in part, to visit some of the “holy sites” at which some of the stories of Jesus took place (or, at least, at which we *remember* some of those stories!). For someone such as myself who grew up hearing about these places, and whose career has revolved around telling the stories of these places, not only were the place names very familiar, they were also freighted with meaning and memory.

What I came to realize was that, in my experience of hearing these stories discussed in sermon and classroom, in my own preaching and teaching, and even in my imagination, a number of these sites existed in a vacuum. I had no idea about the surroundings, the topography, the distance from other locations, etc. (something, I expect, that I was not alone in discovering). This was especially true of Gethsemane, which made the experience of *being there* that much more important for me.

I will suggest below that there are a number of reasons for this lack of contextualization beyond my own *naïveté*, including Biblical, theological, historical, and even artistic reasons. This applies, of course, to a great many of the “Biblical sites” in the Holy Land; but it was my standing in that space called Gethsemane, and looking around at the surrounding area, which helped bring this into focus, and which began this journey.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to explore some of the Biblical, historical and theological background of the Gethsemane story through the lens of my experience in Jerusalem; to offer an explanation for the lack of context which confronted me in that place; and to suggest some corrective homiletical possibilities presented by placing the Garden of Gethsemane on the ground.

Physical Location¹

The traditional site of the “Garden of Gethsemane” is 300 meters east of the Old City of Jerusalem, near the bottom of the Mount of Olives. The Kidron Valley runs north-south between the Old City and the Mount of Olives, enabling an unobstructed view of the opposite side (an important point for contextualization). The Garden is part of the grounds of the Church of All Nations (also called the Church of the Agony). It has been planted with a number of Olive trees (old, but not of Jesus’ day), and is surrounded by an iron fence several feet high. However, given the slope of the hill, one can still obtain a clear view of the eastern wall of Old Jerusalem from the Garden, including the Golden Gate and, just behind it, the Dome of the Rock.²

The 115 feet tall Dome of the Rock³ sits on Mount Moriah, also known as Temple Mount. The wall surrounding this part of Jerusalem forms the eastern edge of Moriah. According to Jewish tradition, the Jewish Temple was located precisely where the Dome of the Rock is now located, and according to the Jewish historian Josephus (ca.37-ca.95), the top of the Temple “was seventy cubits from the ground,”⁴ which works out to a height of at least 105 feet. In other words, *the Jewish Temple of Jesus’ day would have been visible from the Garden of Gethsemane.*⁵

And it is here that this journey has its true beginning, for this raises a number of questions.

The Temple was visible from the Garden. Does this change or challenge how we hear or read the story of Gethsemane? Did this have any meaning for the Evangelists, or the theologians and preachers who followed them? Does this have any implications for us today theologically, pastorally, homiletically? I suggest that for us it does have implications which to this point have been largely ignored, perhaps even (to some extent) intentionally ... which calls for a brief examination of the story.

Gethsemane in the Bible

The story of Jesus in the garden is found in all four Gospel accounts, as well as the Epistle to the Hebrews,⁶ suggesting that some form of this story “was an [important] early Christian memory or understanding.”⁷ What each of the biblical writers does with that story depends on the particular axe the writer had to grind, but it was obviously a powerful story and a potent memory. The Synoptic Gospel writers, naturally, all follow the same basic story in their version of Jesus in Gethsemane. They share a number of details in common:

- Jesus leads the disciples to the Mount of Olives (Mt 26:30; Mk 14:26; Lk 22:39)
- Jesus predicts the disciples’ desertion (Mt 26:31-32; Mk 14:27-28; Lk 22:31-32)
- Peter’s statement of loyalty (Mt 26:33; Mk 14:29,31; Lk 22:33)
- Jesus’ prediction of Peter’s denial (Mt 26:34; Mk 14:30; Lk 22:34)
- Jesus prays fervently to escape what’s coming, yet even more fervently to accept the will of God (Mt 26:39,42,44; Mk 14:36,39; Lk 22:41-44)
- Jesus finds the disciples asleep (Mt 26:40,43,45; Mk 14:37,40,41; Lk 22:45-46)
- Judas guides Jesus’ enemies to the garden (Mt 26:47-49; Mk 14:43-45; Lk 22:47-48)
- Jesus is arrested (Mt 26:50; Mk 14:46; Lk 22:54)

The writer of Hebrews seems to know the same story as the Synoptic writers, that is, one in which Jesus struggles to be faithful to the will of God: “In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death ...”⁸ John’s Christology dramatically changes the way this story is told in the fourth Gospel, “probably because [the

Synoptic perspective] does not suit [John's] purpose. His Jesus is sovereignly in charge of his own movements and will freely lay down his life ..."⁹

It is clear from the above survey that the Biblical writers were not at all concerned with describing the details of the local area around the garden, what could be seen, or, in fact, anything else about it. This is entirely understandable at several different levels:

1. The Biblical writers were not writing a travelogue or biography;¹⁰ they were writing theology. Their concern was to declare what God had done in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, to inspire faith and hope in the believers for whom they wrote, and to provide instruction to help them face the challenges of their day. The location of this part of their stories was incidental to the overriding purpose of proclaiming Christ.
2. The Biblical writers were much more concerned with *what happened* in Gethsemane than with the location itself. Jesus praying, sweating or submitting were much more important to their purpose than describing the setting for the actions they were relating.
3. Finally, with regard to the Jewish Temple: As far as all of the Biblical writers were concerned, the Temple had been eclipsed as a focal point for faith and no longer needed to be included in their relating of salvation history. All four Evangelists tell of Jesus "cleansing" the Temple,¹¹ and his predicting the Temple's destruction.¹² As well, the writer of Hebrews declares that, as a result of his suffering, *Jesus* has become "the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him ..."¹³ What further need have we then of the Temple?

This final point is crucial for understanding the traditions which have grown up around the Gethsemane story, the way the story is portrayed, understood and explained, and why the Jewish Temple, so close to the Garden and visible from virtually all parts of it, has been so universally ignored.

It is time, then, for a brief exploration of the history of what the Church has done with all of this, first theologically and homiletically, and then artistically and devotionally.

Gethsemane in the Theological/Homiletical Tradition

Given the intention of the Evangelists to describe *what happened* in the Garden, as opposed to its setting, it should come as no surprise at all that a majority (if not virtually all) of the Church's preachers and teachers have followed their lead. The importance of the event itself is stressed, and the various (and sometimes creative) applications of its importance give an interesting overview of the issues of the day that were pressing for each of the theologians surveyed.

John Chrysostom (ca.347–407), in his homily, "Father, if it be possible...," uses the story as an opportunity to defend the full humanity of Christ against those who denied it.

Lest what had taken place should be deemed an illusion ..., [Jesus passed] through all the phases incident to man ... He suffered [all] the infirmities of human nature ...

to be hungry, and thirsty, and to sleep and feel fatigue ... For this reason also streams of sweat flowed down ..., and He was sad and downcast¹⁴

Cyril of Alexandria (ca. 378-444), also writing from the perspective of the Christian Roman Empire, insists that Jesus' agony in the Garden had more to do with his foreknowledge of what was to happen to God's chosen people, the Jews, for their part in crucifying God's Messiah (an unfortunate part of the Church's history which is still being felt, and, in some circles, even perpetuated).

He Who was the beloved one [that is, Israel] is greatly hated; he who had the promises is utterly stripped of My gifts; the pleasant vineyard with its rich grapes henceforth will be a desert land, a place dried up, and without water These are the causes of My grief: for these things I am sorrowful.¹⁵

Cyril later adds, "[Jesus'] passion was ... grievous, because it implied the rejection and destruction of the synagogue of the Jews."¹⁶ Ironically, Cyril never mentions the fact that the "synagogue of the Jews" (i.e. the Temple) was just up the hill!

Writing in the Middle Ages, Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) stresses the full humanity of Christ in order to persuade his hearers that Jesus is indeed sympathetic to the plight of human sinners.

As Lord of the virtues he knew the virtue of obedience, and yet the apostle bears witness that "he learned obedience through what he suffered." [Heb 5:8] By this means he also learned mercy, although the mercy of the Lord is from eternity. [Ps 102:17] ... Do you see him becoming what he [already] was, and learning what he [already] knew, seeking in our midst openings and windows by which to search more attentively into our misfortunes?¹⁷

(How unfortunate that Bernard, a strong supporter of the Second Crusade,¹⁸ couldn't extend that same compassion to Muslims who were living in the Holy Land at that time!)

Pastor, preacher, theologian and reformer, Martin Luther (1483-1546) was above all concerned to point his people to the God of grace (as opposed to the more juridical God he had experienced in the Church's practice and preaching) and to proclaim that the gracious Jesus was indeed able to save them. So he emphasized the sufferings that Christ endured on our behalf. "When He prayed in that garden, He was in Gehenna and hell To that valley, then, the Savior had to go and sweat blood, and this sweat testifies abundantly that he tasted death, which is hell"¹⁹

The nineteenth century Baptist preacher and evangelist Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892) attempts to do the same as Luther, emphasizing the willing suffering of Christ, with the hope of inspiring love for the Saviour in his hearers.

He was bowed down as if an enormous weight rested on his soul, as indeed it did. This was the soul-travail, the soul offering for sin, which was completed on the cross [Jesus'] soul was full of sorrow, until he seemed to reach the utmost limit of endurance, and to be at the very gate of death²⁰

Even in our day, the message of preachers seems to be essentially unchanged. Herbert O'Driscoll emphasizes the emotional suffering of Jesus in the garden in order to reach his 20th century listeners.

Because he is fully human, Jesus may sense the possibility of his coming emotional collapse and needed privacy. “I am deeply grieved, even to death,” he says before turning and walking among the trees, throwing himself on the ground, and making his desperate plea for some way out of the dreadful death he knew was imminent. But there is the terrible loneliness. He rises and goes back down the narrow woodland path, only to find the three disciples sleeping.²¹

Ironically, O’Driscoll’s text is John 18, which in fact has no hint of the agonized Jesus he describes, a clear demonstration that the Gethsemane story has taken on a life of its own. “Gethsemane” no longer has its original Hebrew meaning of “olive press” on the side of a hill across from the city; now it means abandonment, agony, betrayal. Gethsemane has come to stand for the human encounter with the *Deus Absconditus*, the God who is absent, an encounter which is understood to take place in the human soul and has virtually *nothing to do with the actual setting* in which this encounter takes place.

Gethsemane in the Artistic/Devotional Tradition

The way Gethsemane has been portrayed in the artistic tradition both reveals the assumptions, and perpetuates the expectations, of what the story means to the various artists, their various patrons, and to those who view the art, especially for devotion or contemplation. “The scene of Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane [note that this is to already limit reflection to the Synoptic version of the story] has had a special place in Christian piety It has served as the subject of art and meditation.”²² As it should! It is a powerful story, which “is a subject for prayerful, heartbroken meditation, more than for human language.”²³ But, again, the setting is unimportant; the internal struggle is all.

In a brief (and entirely unscientific) examination conducted of over fifty examples of Gethsemane art produced through the ages,²⁴ only 14 of those viewed have any indication of a city nearby, and the city is always very far off and very much in the distance. In only a few of these is the city recognizably Jerusalem, and this is almost always indicated by an approaching mob, obviously sent to arrest Jesus in the place they knew he would be.

I suggest that this is indicative of how Gethsemane has been understood throughout Christian history: important not for its location, not for its surroundings, not for its context, but only for the event which took place there which could just as easily have taken place anywhere else. Gethsemane continues to exist in a vacuum.

A Theology of Place

In order to offer a corrective to this tradition, I suggest we begin with another, perhaps more helpful, Christian tradition and teaching: that of Incarnation. “The Word became flesh, and lived among us [literally, ‘pitched his tent with us’].”²⁵

These brief words have inspired libraries! Suffice it to say for our purposes here that “the Word” did not remain floating in the ether, staying in the realm of ideas, aloof from the messy world of human physicality. The Fourth Evangelist, someone

with an amazingly “high” Christology, still anchors the life of Jesus in this physical world, the world of food and smells and sweat and tears and work and family and toilets, and all of these in specific places which not only provide a background setting for these things but also play a crucial role in (literally) contextualizing the interactions of daily human life.

Incarnation affirms that physical beings need physical places, even for the most “spiritual” of activities. And in spite of our (very Greek) tendency to lift the “spiritual” above the “physical,” we *do* embrace the physical, sometimes in spite of ourselves, though frequently in less-than-helpful ways. This can be clearly seen in the attachment people feel toward their church buildings, regardless of its condition, or, indeed, the church’s mission. And this is nothing new. Witness the continued observance of the Temple sacrifices while the Romans were besieging Jerusalem in 70 C.E.,²⁶ not to mention the prayers that continue to this day at the Western Wall in Jerusalem.

Even theologians and preachers who seem most oblivious to the context of the Garden of Gethsemane, and most resistant to placing it “on the ground,” acknowledge that the Garden was an important site in its own right as a physical place for Jesus to use as a retreat, a place to rest, a place to pray.

My question is this: *Why would the Temple, a physical manifestation of the faith of Israel visible from the Garden, not be an important part of the story in Gethsemane, a physical place in which a physical Jesus threw himself onto the physical ground to pray to the God of Israel whose physical house was “right over there”?*

God’s presence; God’s absence

When we climbed up to the Temple mount in Jerusalem during our tour, one of the posted signs which encouraged us to dress and behave appropriately also made mention of the fact that God’s presence always dwells on that mountain. This perspective adds much to the Gethsemane story, especially in its Synoptic versions.

The pathos (and irony) of the story is exponentially increased if we envision Jesus praying to his Abba,²⁷ perhaps even facing his Abba’s house, asking to be delivered from the horror to come, while what actually comes from that direction is the crowd sent to arrest him, as so much of the artwork of Gethsemane portrays.²⁸

As well, in all four Gospels the arrested Jesus is immediately taken to the high priest for questioning. This adds more irony to the story, for the priest is the one who is in charge of the Temple, the one designated to preside over God’s house, the one charged and privileged to utter the Holy Name on the Day of Atonement in the Holy of Holies, *the top of which is precisely what would have been seen from Gethsemane.*

This aspect is strengthened even more if one recalls that the money changers and animal sellers were in the Temple area by the direct invitation of Caiaphas the High Priest in order to take advantage of the buying and selling that was so much a part of Temple sacrificial system, “for the purpose of providing ruinous competition to established markets on the Mount of Olives owned by his political enemies.”²⁹ This was the equivalent of a government subsidized discount warehouse-store

moving into a town and wiping out the local “Ma and Pa” businesses who “just happened” to support the other political party. It doesn’t take much imagination to be aware of the contradictions present in terms of what the Temple was supposed to be about (“a house of prayer for all the nations”³⁰) and what it had become (a place used to increase the wealth and influence of the rich and powerful at the expense of the powerless).

All of this ties into the Synoptic Gethsemane story quite easily. Jesus goes to the Garden, looking for a retreat, if not actual escape, from what is to come. One of his companions has gone to bring the mob. He takes some close friends with him but they fall asleep. He sees the Temple, but it has been entirely corrupted, and those in charge of it are now acting against him. He is truly alone.

Another possible ‘take’ on this would be to emphasize the presence of God not just *with* Jesus as he struggles but *in* Jesus as he prays and suffers, as he sees the Temple as it truly is (a “den of robbers”³¹), as he is arrested. Jesus truly experienced how dreadful life can be, indeed, how dreadful life *has become!* Jesus was not wearing rose-coloured glasses when he faced that night in Gethsemane. He was all too aware of the mess that human life is in all its facets. Yet he stayed in that Garden, within sight of the Temple, waiting for what was to come.

Jesus remaining faithful in the face of all that was against him that night is a bold proclamation that God is not willing that any part of life be considered beyond the reach of divine love and redemption,³² and that “nothing in all creation”³³ will distract God from that mission. John’s account, with his previously mentioned “high Christology,” can easily be seen to inspire this perspective.

The Temple and Gethsemane

Does the addition of the visible Temple change the story of Gethsemane? I suggest it does, by contextualizing both the Garden and the Temple.

- It contextualizes the Garden physically by placing it “on the ground,” on the lower part of the Mount of Olives, on the east side of the Kidron Valley, just outside the “holy city” of Jerusalem, just across from Mount Moriah.
- It contextualizes the Garden theologically by locating it in the shadow of the Temple where God dwells, a poignant counterpoint to Jesus experience of abandonment.
- It contextualizes the Temple politically by reminding us that it was being used for the purposes of power both by the priestly families and by the Roman occupiers who appointed them.³⁴
- It contextualizes the Temple economically across the valley from legitimate businesses, while being used as a draw for an illegitimate business (exploiting pilgrims and putting local business people out of work).³⁵
- It also contextualizes the Temple theologically by recalling that it was a fallen institution when Jesus was there and not just by recalling that it had been destroyed by the time the Gospel stories were written.

Preaching Gethsemane

As stated above, the story of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane appears in all four Gospels, and if one is part of a tradition which makes use of the Revised Common Lectionary the Gethsemane story will be read at least once, and possibly twice, each year during Holy Week.

The first occasion will be on Passion Sunday, assuming that the full Passion Narrative will be read during the service. Naturally, Year A will be Matthew's version, Year B will be Mark's, and Year C will be Luke's telling of the story. This will be a chance to tell the story as it is usually understood (Jesus praying alone, abandoned by all, etc.). Including the presence of the Temple will provide a number of possible contexts for the preacher to explore (e.g. the overt opposition to Jesus from the Temple leadership, the economic exploitation they inflicted on the populace, etc.).³⁶

The second occasion will, of course, be Good Friday, when John's Passion Story is read, usually in its entirety. The Gethsemane story begins John's Passion narrative, and offers the preacher the opportunity to examine Jesus' determination to be faithful to his calling, not just in the face of opposition, but also in the face of fallen societies and systems which are to be redeemed.

One more possibility exists for the preaching of the Gethsemane story. The Church, like the Temple of Jesus' day, is a fallen institution. There will be times and places when the Church, in any of its expressions (congregation, synod/diocese, national body or international partnership) will demonstrate its fallenness. When these occasions occur, much pain and anguish will undoubtedly result. The sensitive preacher will be able to tie the experience of worshippers into the agony experienced by Jesus in Gethsemane, and by bringing the Temple into the picture (*as it was in the Garden*), affirm the pain and disappointment they are feeling, while also affirming God's presence in their struggle (and institution), and God's determination to bring healing to this broken world.

Endnotes

- 1 For the purposes of this paper, I intentionally pass over the scholarly arguments about the exact location of the Garden in which Jesus was arrested. Though undoubtedly interesting, and even important, they do not affect the current discussion. The following thoughts apply wherever the garden was actually located, assuming, of course, that it was indeed situated on the Mount of Olives (which I believe I am safe in assuming).
- 2 Refer to the photo. From <http://assetstours.com>. Permission granted for use by website owner Aubrey Mendez, June 5, 2009.



- 3 <http://www.emporis.com/en/wm/bu/?id=domeofstreetrock-jerusalem-israel> (Accessed May 18, 2009).
- 4 Quoted in translation on <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14499a.htm> (Accessed May 19, 2009).
- 5 Even if this was not the case (which I do not believe), Jesus and his disciples would clearly have seen the Temple as they descended the Mount of Olives on their way to the Garden. Additionally, the surroundings would have been entirely familiar to them all, if we take the various texts at face value. Taken together, this all supports the thesis of this paper.
- 6 Matthew 26:30-57; Mark 14:26-52; Luke 22:39-54; John 18:1-12; Hebrews 5:7-10
- 7 Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave, A Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels*, vol. 1 (New York: Anchor Doubleday, 1994), p. 233.
- 8 Hebrews 5:7. All quotations from the Bible are from the *New Revised Standard Version* (Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America, 1992).
- 9 Gerard Sloyan, *John* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1988), p. 200.
- 10 Frederick C. Grant, "The Gospel According to St. Mark," *The Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), p. 637.
- 11 Matthew 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-19; Luke 19:45-46; John 2:13-22.
- 12 Matthew 24:1-2; Mark 13:1-2; Luke 21:5-6; John 2:19.
- 13 Hebrews 5:9.
- 14 John Chrysostom, "Against Marcionists and Manichæans," <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1910.htm> (Accessed May 19, 2009).

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- 15 Cyril, "Sermon 146," *Commentary on Luke*,
http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/cyрил_on_luke_14_sermons_146_156.htm (Accessed May 18, 2009)
 - 16 Cyril, "Sermon 147," *Commentary on Luke*,
http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/cyрил_on_luke_14_sermons_146_156.htm (Accessed May 18, 2009)
 - 17 Bernard of Clairvaux, "What is the Wall, What are the Windows or Chinks Through Which the Bridegroom Looks?" *Honey and Salt: Selected Spiritual Writings of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux*, ed. John F Thornton and Susan B. Varenne, (New York: Random House, 2007), p. 177.
 - 18 *Webster's New Universal Encyclopaedia*, ed. Hilary McGlynn, (Helicon/Barnes and Noble, 1997), p. 130.
 - 19 "Lectures on Genesis, Chapter 38-44," in *Luther's Works*, vol. 7, trans. Paul D. Pahl (St Louis: Concordia, 1965), p. 302. (This lecture was probably delivered in 1544.)
 - 20 C. H. Spurgeon, *Spurgeon's Popular Exposition of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), p. 237 (previously published as *The Gospel of the Kingdom*, London, 1893).
 - 21 Herbert O'Driscoll, *Four Days in Spring: Christ's Suffering, Dying, and Rising in Our Lives*. (Toronto: ABC Publishing, 2007), p. 57.
 - 22 Brown, *Death of the Messiah*, p. 216.
 - 23 Spurgeon, *Popular Exposition*, p.237.
 - 24 <http://www.textweek.com/art/gethsemane.htm> (Accessed May 19, 2009)
 - 25 John 1:14
 - 26 Josephus' Writings, Book 25, chapter 1, #3. Text at
<http://www.godrules.net/library/flavius/flaviusb25c1.htm> (Accessed May 22, 2009)
 - 27 Aramaic for "Father," or, better, "Daddy"
 - 28 See above.
 - 29 Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew* (Louisville: John Knox, 1993), p. 241.
 - 30 Mark 11:17.
 - 31 Matthew 21:13; Mark 11:17; Luke 19:46.
 - 32 See 2nd Peter 3:9, "The Lord... is patient, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance."
 - 33 Romans 8:38-39
 - 34 Jonathan L. Reed, *The HarperCollins Visual Guide to the New Testament* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), p. 50.
 - 35 See above, footnote # 29.
 - 36 See above.