Is the Western Wall an Eliadean *axis mundi*? - An exploration into contemporary Jewish pilgrimage in Jerusalem

by David Rubin

Mircea Eliade sees *hierophany* (manifestation of a higher being) as consecrating profane space, transforming and revealing it as the centre of the homo religiosus' world, an *axis mundi*. This paper examines the sacredness of the Western Wall in Jerusalem in the light of its hierophany, and asks whether the Wall serves today as an Eliadean *axis mundi*, implying a unique, temporal transferal of sacrality from the Temple Mount, through human agency. This research is based on literature on the concepts of religion and sacrality and a phenomenological approach, based on fieldwork as a participant observer of the behavior and religiosity at the Wall. The sacrality of the Western Wall was found to be defined by its boundaries and physical effects; its experience, (including sacrality manifested through human agency,) though 'saturated with being', could not be said to be so significant as to present the concentrated reality of an *axis mundi*. The Wall's sacred space, bound to the Temple (Mount), was found to resonate with a feeling of yearning, the sacredness of God in exile.

> The entire world can be seen in the eye... The white is the ocean; the red in the white is the dry land interspersed with water. The iris in the centre is Jerusalem, the centre of the world. The centermost point of the eye, the pupil through which the eye sees, is Zion, in which the whole world can be seen. (Zohar)[1]

Introduction

The aim of this research is to examine the nature of the sacredness of the Western Wall through the ritual and religiosity expressed and the experience felt at the Wall.

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[1] *Zohar* I, (Mantua Edition), 226a. בגין דעינוי דבר נש חיזו דעלמא ביה אתחזי, וכל גוונין הכי אינון דאסחרו, חוורא דביה הוא ימא רבא אוקינוס דאסחר כל עלמא בכל סטרוי, גוונא אחרא הוא יבשתא דאקיפו מיא, ויבשתא קאים בין מיא, הכי הוא גוונא בין מיא, גוונא אחרא תליתאה היא במציעותא דביה, דא ירושלם דהיא אמציעותא דעלמא. גוונא רביעאה היא חיזו דכל עינא דכל עינא ואקרי בת עין, דבההוא בת עין אתחזי פרצופא, וחיזו יקרא מכלא, דא ציון דאיהי נקודה אמצעיתא מכלא, דחיזו דכל עלמא תמן אתחזי, ותמן שריא שכינתא, דהיא שפירו דכלא וחיזו דכלא, ועינא דא הוא ירותת עלמא

Also known as 'the Wailing Wall', the Western Wall in Jerusalem, Israel, attains its religious significance through its adjacency to the holiest place in Judaism, the Temple Mount. Nonetheless, notwithstanding its genealogy, the Western Wall is often erroneously seen and referred to as the holiest place in Judaism (today), since, according to rabbinic law, it is forbidden for Jews to enter the original vicinity of the Temple, due to the present absence of ritual purity.[2] Accordingly, based on the research's findings, this paper will debate whether the Western Wall has taken the place of the Temple Mount as a modern-day *axis mundi* (in the Eliadean sense) and thereby consider whether sacred space is a human construct.

To do that, this paper will assess the manifestation of sacrality at the Wall in the light of David Émile Durkheim's theory of sociality generating the notion of 'sacred', Mircea Eliade's theory of the divinity and 'existential value' of sacred space, Baruch Bokser's notion of 'mobile "temporary sacrality"', Catherine Bell and also Richard Cornstock's approach to ritual and behaviour defining sacredness, Rudolph Otto's notion of sacredness as an inner experience, and various other thinkers' philosophies.[3] These will be viewed against the backdrop of the Temple Mount and Western Wall's long history.

The fieldwork is based on Abraham Joshua Heschel's and Christopher Tilley's theories of phenomenology and Charlotte Aull Davies' methodology of participant observation, which provide the grounds for a phenomenological

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[2] See, for example, Howard Schwartz, *Tree of Souls: The Mythology of Judaism: The Mythology of Judaism*, (Oxford University Press, USA, 2004), p. lix.; *Mishnah*, *Keilim*, 1:8.; F. M. Loewenberg, 'Where Jerusalem Jews Worship' in *Hakirah*, (Vol. 16, 2013), p. 223.

[3] Emile Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, (London : G. Allen & Unwin; New York, Macmillan, 1915) pp. 12, 16, 17, 221 (also pp. 10, 12: 'Religion is something eminently social', a 'social organisation' that is 'the model for spatial organisation'); Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, [online] Available at https://archive.org/details/TheSacredAndTheProfane access. 11th Jan. 2016, pp. 21, 22, 26, 36-47, 60-65; Baruch M. Bokser, *Approaching Sacred Space* (The Harvard Theological Review, Vol. 78, No. 3/4, Jul. - Oct., 1985), pp. 279-299; Catharine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford University Press), W. Richard Comstock, *A Behavioural Approach to the Sacred: Category Formation in Religious Studies* (Journal of the American Academy of Religion, Vol. 49, No. 4 (Dec., 1981), pp. 625-643); Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. G. W. Harvey (Oxford University Press, 1923).

viewpoint on the Wall and a view of the sacred through observation of ritualistic behaviour.[4]

The methodology used will be both a literary-based historical and cultural enquiry, and a phenomenological and self-reflexive approach based on fieldwork at the Western Wall as a participant observer on visits to the Wall over a fortnight period at various times of religious significance, recording personal experiences and observing the modes of religious expression of the Wall's visitors.

The literature that has informed this research is wide-ranging, touching on a number of areas, including the extensive literature devoted to the study of religion and its notion of sacrality. Thus, this research draws on Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy*, Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane*, Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, as well as F. M. Loewenberg's study, *Where Jerusalem Jews Worship*, Bokser's *Approaching Sacred Space*, Bell's *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* and Comstock's *A Behavioural Approach to the Sacred*.

As a result of my findings, this essay seeks to discuss how sacrality may be artificially created. It will also address various levels of sacredness, the nature of the *axis mundi* and whether such a notion exists 'in exile'. The essay will thus critically analyse the possibility of the Western Wall as an Eliadean *Axis Mundi*, by taking into account its historical and cultural significance and the religious behaviour, ritual and atmosphere experienced at the Wall.

Academic rationale

The study of pilgrimage and experience of sacrality at the Western Wall presents a unique opportunity to delve into the human psyche and its different reactions based on presupposed ideologies presenting diverse notions of sacrality. Moreover, it enables a hands-on analysis of the effects of an Eliadean *axis mundi*, if it should prove to be so.

Hence, the purpose of this research, particularly through the fieldwork, is to attempt to assess the various nuances of experience of the sacred, vis-à-vis

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[4] Abraham Joshua Heschel, Susannah Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays*, (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997); Christopher Tilley, *Interpreting Landscapes: Geologies, Topographies, Identities; Explorations in Landscape Phenomenology 3* (Left Coast Press, 15 Jun 2010), pp. 25-40; Charlotte Aul Davies, *Reflexive Ethnography; A guide to researching selves and others* (Routledge, London, New York, 1999), pp. 67-92.

the theories regarding it; as Timothy Insoll writes, 'the same landscape can mean different things to different people'.[5]

These theories include Eliade's notion of sacredness generating a sense of being and his idea of hierophany as defining sacred space; moreover, his concept of the Jerusalem Temple as the *axis mundi* of the Jewish People is central to the uniqueness of this project, in view of the role the Temple plays in the collective religious consciousness of the Jewish People in its Platonic form and its assumed future return.[6]

This evolution of importance of the Temple Mount, subsequently transferred in part to the Western Wall, is unique. This paper will seek to ascertain whether its sacrality preceded subsequent advances in the development of the Judaic religion or whether it was its result, in the light of Durkheim's definition of religion through the projection of a notion of sacredness.[7]

Jonathan Z. Smith's suggestion that 'there is nothing that is inherently sacred or profane' but sacredness is created through the 'attention focused on it, in a highly marked way' – and also, the theory held by Durkheim and Smith, that sacredness is not intrinsic but a phenomenological reality – will be viewed as opposed to the Talmud's notion of the Temple site's intrinsic sacredness.[8] Eliade saw sacredness, although necessarily experienced and therefore phenomenological, nonetheless more intrinsic than Durkheim or Smith's viewpoint.[9]

The particular ritual action peculiar to the Western Wall will be observed in the light of Bell's emphasis on ritual action as creating sacred space, Ronald L. Grimes' understanding of ritual behaviour and religious performance as

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[5] Timothy Insoll, *Archaeology, Ritual, Religion* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 88.

[6] Eliade, *The Sacred*, pp. 20-24, 37, 38, 42, 44, 52, 60.

[7] Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, pp. 37, 47, 182.

[8] Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual*, (University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 104; Jonathan Z. Smith, "The Bare Facts of Ritual", *History of Religions* 20.1/2 (Aug-Nov 1980): pp. 112-127. Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, p.229; Babylonian Talmud, *Chagigoh*, (Vilna, 1835), p. 3b.

[9] Eliade, *The History of Religious Ideas*, vol. 1, xiii

creating a *locus* of ritual practice and Cornstock's use of behaviour in defining the boundaries of the sacred space. [10]

Bell has defined ritualization as 'a way of acting that is designed and orchestrated to distinguish and privilege what is being done in comparison to other, usually more quotidian, activities', 'the strategic production of expedient schemes that structure an environment in such a way that the environment appears to be the source of the schemes and their values' and 'the medium chosen to invoke those ordered relationships that are thought to obtain between human beings in the here-and-now and non-immediate sources of power, authority, and value'. [11]

Furthermore, the fieldwork provides ample opportunity for assessing Otto's theory of the 'numinous', and the various emotions he describes in association with 'the holy'.[12]

Though both Durkheim and Eliade present sacredness as essential to all religions, since Eliade saw it as generating a sense of being, even using the Jerusalem Temple as an example of *axis mundi* for the Jewish people, the fieldwork will also attempt to ascertain if there is a different 'sense of being' at the Wall, and thereby to assess if that sense of *axis mundi* is still present in the modern mind.[13]

Literature review

Though ritual theorists have long argued that ritual action creates sacred space, Eliade's theory of the importance of hierophany creating an *axis mundi* enables a consideration of the site over and beyond any ritual behaviour involved.

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[10] Catherine M. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 74, 140; Catherine M. Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. xi; Ronald L. Grimes, 'Jonathan Z. Smith's Theory of Ritual Space', in *Religion* 29 (1999): pp. 261-273; Ronald L. Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies*: (Revised Edition, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995), p. 5; Comstock, *A Behavioural Approach to the Sacred: Category Formation in Religious Studies*, pp. 636-9.

[11] Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (1992), pp. 74, 140; Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (1997), p. xi.

[12] Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. G. W. Harvey (Oxford University Press, 1923); pp. 1-49.

[13] Eliade, *The Sacred*, pp. 20-24.

In *The Sacred and the Profane*, Mircea Eliade discusses *hierophany*, (the manifestation of a higher being) as consecrating a profane, chaotic space and transforming it into a sacred, cosmic space. According to Eliade, a hierophany marks a space as holy, an 'orientation in the chaos of homogeneity', revealing that point as the centre of the world where contact with divinity is possible. This connection of the earth to the heaven (and underworld) is referred to as the *axis mundi*. It is advantageous for the religious person to settle near his *axis mundi* as it represents 'a superabundance of reality'.[14]

The Hebrew term (for sacred), *qadosh*, generally translated as 'holy', is defined by the rabbis as separated and ascribed to a higher purpose.[15] This 'separation' can be divinely orchestrated, as in Eliade's hierophany, or 'artificially' sanctified, by man, as in Durkheim's definition of 'sacred things', as 'things set apart and forbidden'.[16]

However, according to the Talmud, in order for the sacrality to have permanent affect, it must involve human action and intent.[17] Such a sanctity was operational in Solomon's Temple.[18] Moreover, its series of exclusions and separations, according to Eliade, become transitional borders between the religious and the secular, as he writes, 'the threshold is the limit, the boundary, the frontier', a symbol and vehicle of passage from the one type of world to the other.[19]

Though that intent was operational with regards to Solomon's Temple, it had no direct bearing on the Western Wall. Nonetheless, the fact that the Western Wall is still standing, is seen by many as a theophany, as the Midrash reports that God swore that the Western Wall would never be destroyed.[20]

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[14] Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, pp. 21, 26, 34, 37-8.

[15] Babylonian Talmud, *Tosfos Qiddushin*, (Vilna, 1835), p. 2b, s.v. *d'osar loh*; *Rashi*, *Leviticus* 19:2, s.v. *qedoshim tih'yu*, *Nachmanides*, *ibid*.

[16] Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, p. 129.

[17] Babylonian Talmud, *Chagigoh,* (Vilna, 1835), p. 3b.

[18] Babylonian Talmud, *Chagigoh,* (Vilna, 1835), p. 3b.

[19] Eliade, *The Sacred*, p. 25.

[20] *Midrash Raboh, Song of Songs*, 2:26.

הנה זה עומד אחר כתלנו, אחר כותל מערבי של בית המקדש, למה? שנשבע לו הקב"ה שאינו חרב
לעולם ושער הכהן ושער חולדה לא חרבו לעולם עד שיחדשם הקב"ה")מדרש רבה שיר השירים פרשה
ב פסקה כו

Moreover, according to Durkheim, sanctity spreads: 'Once items of a clan, considered sacred, are stored in a specific location, neighbouring trees and rocks appear sacred'.[21] Thus, the sacrality inherent in the Temple Mount can be seen as 'referred' to the surrounding walls.

Whereas Eliade understood the 'non-homogeneity' of space to manifest through 'the experience of an opposition', Smith proposed that attention focused in a particular way on certain objects, that marks them out from other kinds of object creates the notion of sacrality.[22]

The importance of a 'ritual environment' is stressed by Bell and Grimes. Although Grimes has not developed a systematic approach to the study and interpretation of the spatial aspect of ritual performances, the notion of ritual space as 'the locus of ritual practice' constitutes one of the angles from which ritual enactments can be viewed.[23]

Bell traces the relationship between ritual and place to Arnold van Gennep's work on rites of passage.[24] According to Bell, Van Gennep, 'alerted scholars to the ways in which ritual can actually define what is sacred, not simply react to the sacred as something already and for always fixed'.[25] For them, the sacred is created by human activity. Furthermore, rituals can create levels in sacrality, distinctions that effectively divide one space from another.

However, according to Eliade, in sacred space, defined by the hierophany or *axis mundi*, reality is experienced with greater clarity, characteristically unique, significant and special, whereas profane space consists of every other space.[26] Thus, though appreciating that the nature and quality of sacrality is

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See, for example http://www.mpaths.com/2016/02/prayers-go-to-heaven.html [acc. 2nd Jan. 2016]

[21] Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, pp. 308, 278, 318.

[22] Eliade, *The History of Religious Ideas*, vol. 1, xiii; *Quest*, I; *No Souvenirs*, 1; Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual*, (University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 104; Jonathan Z. Smith, "The Bare Facts of Ritual", *History of Religions* 20.1/2 (Aug-Nov 1980): pp. 112-127.

[23] Catharine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford University Press), p. 98; Ronald L. Grimes, 'Jonathan Z. Smith's Theory of Ritual Space', *Religion* 29 (1999): pp. 261-273.

[24] Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage,*trans. M. B. Vizedom and G. L. Caffee (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

[25] Bell, *Ritual : Perspectives and Dimensions* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2009), p. 37.

[26] Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, pp. 21, 26, 34, 37-8.

enhanced and perpetuated by ritual and human observance, it is primarily the sacrality that encourages ritual.[27]

Additionally, Eliade argues that doors and thresholds are the symbolic markers that bridge the gaps between the sacred and profane space.[28] Symbols and mechanisms of passage, these points act not only as barriers and boundaries but also as channels of communication between the two realms.[29]

Methodology

The methodology used will be a literary-based historical and cultural enquiry, plus a phenomenological approach, based on fieldwork at the Western Wall as a participant observer on visits to the Wall over a fortnight period at different times of religious significance, (i.e. day and night, weekday and Sabbath, early morning and early afternoon, evening and midnight) recording a personal diary of own observations, feelings and experiences, observing regulars and visitors, locals and tourists, Jews and presumed non-Jews, religious and non-religious, of various ethnic backgrounds, whilst engaging in various modes of customary religious expression, thus also enabling a personal self-reflexive approach. Several photos will also help convey the set-out.

This self-reflexive methodology is based on Charlotte Aull Davies' work on participant observation. 'Reflexivity', writes Davies is 'a process of self-reference', the researcher's motives an important source of research problems and theoretical perspectives.[30]

Reflexive Considerations

The praying area of the Western Wall is divided into a men's section and a women's section. It should be noted that my observations generally involved the men's section.

Moreover, as I am an orthodox Jew from birth, the fieldwork and phenomenological observations (as a religious believing observer) will be duly

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[27] See Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*, pp.30-31, for an example of ritual use and enhancement.

[28] Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, p. 25.

[29] Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, p. 26.

[30] Charlotte Aull Davies, *Reflexive ethnography: A guide to researching selves and others*, (Second edition. Routledge, London and New York, 2008), pp. 30-33.

coloured. The fact that I am 'middle-aged' may also have an effect on the degree of emotional observance or detachment from the place.

Moreover, a practitioner of religious ritual amongst similar practitioners, per-force becomes a part of the unity of the field of ritual, affected and affecting his surroundings. The observations are thus inevitably determined by my participation and position – literally and metaphorically – at the site. However, as Davies observes, the sharing of religion, ethnicity, sex, or class, does not guarantee mutual understanding.[31]

Field work and Discussion

My visits to the Western Wall were spread over a fortnight, including prolonged visits on the Jewish Sabbath. Hazards of being too observational in the light of police security issues was averted by my blending in with the surrounding Jewish orthodoxy in appearance and behaviour. I was therefore able to discern the pilgrimage, religious ritual and behaviour of a wide variety of individuals over almost all of the twenty-four hours of the weekday, and over a significant part of the Sabbath.

I will start my account with a description of the layout, then a description of those who frequent the Wall, their ritual and behaviour during the week, and finally with a self-reflexive account of my own feelings at the Wall.

Figure 1- The Western Wall and its Plaza.

[31] Charlotte Aull Davies, *Reflexive ethnography: A guide to researching selves and others*, (Second edition. Routledge, London and New York, 2008), pp. 110–111.

The Western Wall is preceded by a large paved plaza (fig. 1). The plaza has an off-centre partition in order to accommodate men and women according to the *Halakha* of a synagogue. A further part of the Western Wall is accessible through a tunnel-like edifice, under an arch known as 'Wilson's Arch' (fig. 2). This too has a private, (white) curtained area for women.

The visitors to the Wall consisted of six categories: Jewish ultra-orthodox,

Figure 2- Prayer (the Amidoh) in Wilson's Arch

Jewish modern orthodox, Jewish 'traditional' secular, Jewish secular, non-Jewish orthodox and non-Jewish secular. These can be further divided into 'regulars' and non-regular 'visitors'. The Jewish orthodox can also be further divided towards those who sympathetic to the modern state of Israel and those who oppose it (for religious, idealistic reasons).

Despite the fact that the non-Jewish visitors might be further categorised according to religion, belief and level of belief, as I did not conduct an interview I was unable to ascertain this. I have therefore grouped them together, as logic dictates.

The regulars, for the most part, were either Jewish ultra-orthodox or Jewish orthodox. These were besides the handful of charity collectors who appear to have 'fixed' places on the way to the Western Wall plaza. Young soldiers, either secular or religious, are frequent visitors. There is also a constant flow of tourists during the day, Jewish and non-Jewish, often taking pictures of the Wall and its surrounds. This generally presents a dichotomy of sacred and the profane.

Of the orthodox, some participate in the prayers of the day. Others say Psalms, private prayers and might also study religious texts. It should be noted that according to the *Halakha*, it is preferable to pray the obligatory prayer

[called the *amidoh*, the 'standing prayer'] in an enclosed area.[32] Thus, there are those who are particular not to pray any of the main prayers outside, in the Western Wall Plaza. Should they wish to pray any of the three daily prayers, they do so in the tunnelled area of Wilson's Arch.

The less religious will take a *kippah* (skullcap) at the stand. He will wonder awkwardly to the Wall and rest his hands on the stones, often staying there for several minutes in private prayer. Others, perhaps with a more religious background, may take a prayer-book or book of Psalms and pray from it.

There are those who insert a *kvittel* in the crevices between the large stones, often accompanied by a still, whispered prayer (fig. 3). Amid the prayers, tears are spilt, sometimes copious, sometimes a mere reddening of the eyes.

Figure 3 - A visitor placing a 'kvittel' in the Wall.

The atmosphere at night differs strongly to that of the day and a weekday is different from the Sabbath. During the week, it is only in the early hours of the morning, around two o' clock, that the Wall becomes quieter; perhaps ten men can still be found praying outside or moving around, and another ten inside the tunnelled enclosure. From about three-thirty, the area starts filling up gradually, with prayers starting an hour before sunrise and the plaza gradually filling.

At the moment of sunrise, everyone turns quiet, as the *amidoh* [still, standing prayer] is said. The Morning Prayers are now being said by various quorums and they continue till mid-morning. At these times, there are so many groups and individuals praying, that finding a still corner is difficult. Nonetheless, it is always relatively easy to find a space by the Wall, except for on the festivals.

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[32] Babylonian Talmud, *Berachoth*, (Vilna, 1835), p. 34b; *Shulchan Aruch,* 90:5; *Eshel Avraham* (Butshatsh), *ad loc*.

On the Sabbath, the area is packed. The mood is jubilant and festive, and the prayers are conducted in song or cantorial style, according to the prayer'-leader's ability.

On leaving the plaza, the custom is to step backwards, slightly bowing as one walks out.

Feelings: Standing from afar, there is subtle sense of awe. As one enters into the plaza's precincts, there is a noticeable change in mood. The huge stones create their own ethereal effect. Approaching the stones, there is a feeling of coming home, of belonging. It is different from the feeling in a synagogue.

The prayer is one of yearning and longing, as well as a feeling of closeness to the *Shekhinah* [Divine Presence]. Closing one's eyes at night, one feels privy to a Presence, a *numen*. However, the stillness and depth of the experience is marred by the almost constant activity at the Wall. There is little in the way of order and decorum: each person may do as he sees fitting, some even saying out quite loudly their prayers and Psalms.

Being by the Wall, there is a feeling of seclusion and oneness with G-d. Praying any place within the Plaza, might be compared to praying near the Holy Ark in a synagogue; the love, awe, the feeling of closeness to the Unknowable One, is practically palpable.

This feeling of closeness is closest to that described by Otto, as feeling one's own consciousness yet simultaneous experiencing the self as nothing, being nothing in the presence of that which is all.[33] There is also the element of Eliade's 'the sacred is saturated with being'.[34] This feeling starts on entering the precincts.

(Interestingly, there is a somewhat oppressive feeling the Wilson's Arch section but this may be as a result of the incessant noise coming from the air-conditioners.)

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[33] Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. G. W. Harvey (Oxford University Press, 1923), p. 53.
[34] Eliade, *The Sacred*, p. 25.

Final Thoughts

In a city sacred to three religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (or Mohammedanism), a city of the world's best religious history for three thousand years, a city where millions turn their thoughts with reverence and adoration, the Western Wall is one of the central 'attractions', attracting the interest of a large number of people from all walks of life every day. It is therefore not surprising that religious feelings are encountered at the Wall.

Figure 4 – The author at the Western Wall (2013)

Though the feelings experienced at the Wall were similar to those when entering a synagogue, the intensity was much greater. The ritual – the placing of *kvittelach* (prayers in note-form) in the Wall, the constant praying – does not, to my mind, create the atmosphere; it is a result of it. As Bell writes, 'this second pattern describes ritual as type of functional or structural mechanism to reintegrate the thought-action dichotomy, which may appear in the guise of a distinction between belief and behaviour or any number of other homologous pairs'.[35]

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[35] Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, p. 20.

However, it will be recalled that these feelings started on entry to the vicinity. Evidently, as proposed by Grimes, it is the demarcation of the area that precipitates the emotions. Moreover, the hierophany inherent in the Temple Mount, and the theophany inherent in the Western Wall, no longer create the Eliadean *axis mundi* for the modern Jew. In its place, there is a feeling of yearning for what is missing, for the Western Wall's sacrality is a poor remnant of that which was. Simon Goldhill expressed this well, saying,

The space of [the Temple's] absence has attracted the hopes and aspirations of millions of people over the centuries, and continues to fuel the most intense feelings in the Middle East and beyond   The Temple, lost and reconstructed, yearned for and mourned for, pictured and sung about, is above all else a monument of the imagination.[36]

Indeed, the sacrality of the Western Wall appears in part artificial. While there are records of Jewish religious activity on the Temple Mount, as late as the thirteenth century, when the Italian Jew, Obadiah da Bertinero visited Jerusalem in 1487, though impressed by the stones in the Wall, he felt no special religious emotion.[37] Indeed, the Prophet Ezekiel saw the Divine Presence leave Jerusalem over the Mount of Olives after the destruction of the city by Nebuchadnezzar.[38]

The spiritual idealism that created a kind of elasticity into the vision of the Temple Mount and its sacrality, expanding the *axis mundi* from the Temple Mount, to the city and beyond, remains distilled within the people's consciousness as a Platonic ideal.

Conclusion

The aim of this research project was to ascertain the nature of the sacrality of the Western Wall, to discuss how sacrality may be artificially created and critically analyse the possibility of the Western Wall as an Eliadean *Axis Mundi*,

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[36] Simon Goldhill, *The Temple Of Jerusalem*, (Harvard University Press, 15 Oct 2011), pp. 15, 18.

[37] Ovadiah of Bartenurah, *Pathway to Jerusalem*, trans. Y. D. Shulman (CIS, 1992), p. 49; Karen Armstrong, 'The Holiness of Jerusalem: Asset or Burden?', in *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (Spring, 1998), pp. 5-19.

[38] *Ezekiel*, 11:22– 23. (See John F. Kutsko, *Between Heaven and Earth: Divine Presence and Absence in the Book of Ezekiel*, (Eisenbrauns, 2000), p. 94.)

taking into account its historical and cultural significance and the religious behaviour, ritual and atmosphere experienced at the Wall.

Using fieldwork, with thoughts and conclusions based on literature devoted to the study of religion and its notion of sacrality, such as Otto, Eliade, Durkheim, Bell and Smith, and methodology based primarily on Davies, the nature of sacrality of the Western Wall was found, according to my personal experience, to be defined by its boundaries and its experience, though 'saturated with being', in my experience could not be said to be so significantly outstanding as to present an *axis mundi*.

The Wall's sacredness, bound to the Temple that was, is the sacredness of God in exile.

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Figure 4: photograph by the author.