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In Jerusalem by Tamim Al-Barghouti

Housseem Ben Lazreg
University of Alberta, benlazre@ualberta.ca

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Housseem Ben Lazreg
In Jerusalem

Tamim Al-Barghouti
في القدس

We passed by the home of the beloved
but the enemy's laws and wall turned us away
I said to myself, "Maybe, that is a blessing"
What will you see in Jerusalem when you visit?
You will see all that you can't stand
when her houses become visible from all sides
When meeting her beloved, not every soul rejoices
Nor does every absence harm
If they are delighted when meeting before departure
such joy cannot remain kindled
For once your eyes have seen Jerusalem
You will only see her, wherever you look.

In Jerusalem, a greengrocer from Georgia,
annoyed with his wife,
thinks of going on vacation or painting his house
In Jerusalem, a middle-aged man from Upper Manhattan
holds a Torah and teaches Polish boys its commandments
In Jerusalem, an Ethiopian policeman
seals off a street in the marketplace,
A machine gun hangs from the shoulder of a teenage settler,
A person wearing a yarmulke¹
bows at the Wailing Wall,²
Blonde European tourists who don't see Jerusalem at all
but spend most of the time taking pictures of each other

¹ A skullcap worn in public by Orthodox Jewish men or during prayer by other Jewish men.

² A place of prayer and pilgrimage sacred to the Jewish people.

beside a Palestinian woman selling radishes in public squares all day long
In Jerusalem, there are walls of basil
In Jerusalem, there are barricades of concrete
In Jerusalem, the soldiers marched with heavy boots over the clouds
In Jerusalem, we were forced to pray on the asphalt
In Jerusalem, everyone is there but you.

And History turned to me and smiled:
“Have you really thought that you would overlook them
and see others?
Here they are in front of you;
They are the text while you are the footnote and margin
O son, have you thought that your visit would remove, from the city’s face,
the thick veil of her present, so that you may see what you desire?
In Jerusalem, everyone is there but you.

Jerusalem is the wandering deer
As fate sentenced it to departure
You still chase her since she bid you farewell
O son, calm down for a while, I see that you began to faint”
In Jerusalem, everyone is there but you.

O historian, wait,
The city has two timelines:
One foreign, serene, with steady steps as if it is walking asleep
The other wears a mask and walks secretly with caution
And Jerusalem knows herself,
Ask the people there, everyone will guide you
Everything in the city
has a tongue which, when you ask, will reply

In Jerusalem, the crescent becomes more curved like an embryo
Bending towards other crescents over the domes
And over the years, their relation developed to be like a father to a son

In Jerusalem, the stones of the buildings are quoted from the Bible and the
Quran

In Jerusalem, beauty is octagonal and blue
On top of it, lies a golden dome³
that looks like, I think, a convex mirror
Reflecting the face of the heavens
Playing with it, drawing it near
Distributing the sky, like aid in a siege for those in need
If people appeal to God after Friday sermon

In Jerusalem, the sky is shared by everyone,
We protect it and it protects us
And we carry it on our shoulders
If time oppresses its moons.

In Jerusalem, the marble columns are dark
as though their veins were smoke
Windows, high in mosques and churches,
took dawn by hand, showing him how to paint with colors
He says, “like this”
but the windows reply, “no, like this”
And after long debate, they compromise
as the dawn is free when outside the threshold
But if he wants to enter through God’s Windows
He has to abide by their rules

In Jerusalem there’s a school built by a Mameluke⁴ who came from beyond
the river,
was sold at a slave market in Isfahan

³ The most famous Islamic site in Jerusalem is the Dome of the Rock (*Qubbat as-Sakhrah*). A beautiful edifice, the Dome of the Rock can be seen from all over Jerusalem.

⁴ A member of a military class, originally composed of slaves, that seized control of the Egyptian sultanate in 1250, ruled until 1517, and remained powerful until crushed by Egyptian ruler Muhammad Ali in 1811.

to a merchant from Baghdad, who traveled to Aleppo,
and gave the Mameluke to Aleppo's Prince
Fearing the blueness in the Mameluke's left eye,
the Prince gave him to a caravan heading for Egypt
where soon, he became the vanquisher of the Moguls and the Sovereign Sultan

In Jerusalem, the scent of Babylon and India
are at an herbalist's shop in Khan El Zeit⁵
I swear, it is a scent with a language that you will understand if you listen;
It says to me
when tear gas canisters are being fired
"Don't worry"
And as the gas wanes, that scent fills the air again and says:
"You see?"

In Jerusalem, contradictions get along, and wonders cannot be denied
People check them out like pieces of old and new fabric
and miracles there are tangible.

In Jerusalem, if you shake hands with an old man or touch a building
you will find, engraved on your palm, my friend, a poem or two

In Jerusalem, despite successive calamities
a breeze of innocence and childhood fills the air
And you can see doves fly high
announcing, between two shots, the birth of an independent state

In Jerusalem, the rows of graves
are the lines of the city's history while the book is the soil
Everyone has passed through
For Jerusalem welcomes all visitors, whether disbelievers or believers

⁵ *Khan el Zeit* is the busiest, most colorful shopping street in the Old City of Jerusalem. It has a popular market where spices, dried fruit, herbs, coffee, and pastries are sold.

Walk through, and read the headstones in all languages
You will find the Africans, the Europeans, the Kipchaks, the Slavs, the Bosniaks,
the Tatars, the Turks, the believers, the disbelievers,
the poor and the rich, the hermits, and the miscreants
Here lie all sorts of people that ever walked the earth
They were the footnotes of the book, now they are the main text before us.

Is it just for us that the city has become too small?
Oh chronicler! What made you exclude us?
Re-write and think again, for I see that you made a grave mistake

The eyes close, then look again
The driver of the yellow car heads north, away from the city's gates.
And now Jerusalem is behind us
I could glance at her through the right wing-mirror
Her colors have changed before the sunset
Then, a smile sneaked onto my face
and said to me when I looked close and careful,
"Oh you who weep behind the wall, are you a fool?
Have you lost your mind?
Do not weep because you were excluded from the main text
O Arab, do not weep, and know for sure
that whomever is in Jerusalem
It is only you I see."

Commentary

Tamim Al-Barghouti is a famous Palestinian poet, columnist and political scientist. He is one of the most widely read poets in the Arab World. In 2011, Barghouti won the prize “Prince of Poets” in a TV competition. Tamim’s charisma, literary virtuosity, and political engagement captured the imagination of a wide Arab audience. He was a visiting professor of politics at Georgetown University in Washington DC from 2008 till 2011, and is currently a Consultant to the United Nations Economic and Social Committee for West Asia. He has published six poetry collections in both colloquial and classical Arabic, *Al-Manzar* (The Scene), 2000, *Maqam Iraq* (The Iraqi Ode), 2005, *Fil Quds* (In Jerusalem), 2008, and *Ya Masr Hanet* (Oh Egypt, It’s Close), 2012, and two academic books on Arab politics and history (*Benign Nationalism: Nation State Building Under Occupation, the Case of Egypt*; and *The Umma and the Dawla: The Nation State and the Arab Middle East*).

This poem is a diary of Tamim’s last visit to the occupied capital of his homeland. It is marked by a sad atmosphere through the allusions to the occupation soldiers, the illegal settlers, and the apartheid walls. It is a literary reportage from Jerusalem, broadcasted according to what the poet’s eyes witnessed. Nevertheless, the poem ends with a cheerful and optimistic tone. Thematically, the first part of the poem provides a realistic picture of Jerusalem, in which the poet highlights the different segments of the occupation forces such as the vegetable seller, the religious people, the Ethiopian policeman (Flasha Jews), and the armed settlers. However, in that same city, Muslims are prevented from praying in the Al-Aqsa Mosque, so they pray on the ground. The poem moves to another theme using wonderful rhetorical expressions and the poet converses with the history that was written with an impartial stance. This dialogue is characterized by a long description of Jerusalem, in which the poet describes the multiple identity of the city (Islamic, Christian and Jewish facets), and ends with an inclusive portrayal of all the nations and peoples that settled in Jerusalem.

This poem posits some challenges when translating it to English, notably on the stylistic and cultural level. On the stylistic level, the poet uses a hybrid poetic style that mixes Arabic classical prosody and free verse. In translating, I rendered the whole poem in free verse for two reasons: on the one hand, I would like to put the emphasis on the narrative aspect of the poem and the main theme (the visit to Jerusalem). On the other hand, I found it extremely challenging to preserve the rhymes of the source text as this poem is meant to be performed.

On the cultural level, there are many references that are culture-specific, such as the yarmulke, the Wailing Wall, the Golden Dome, *Mameluke*, and *Khan El Zeit*. I added footnotes that would help a non-Arab audience to grasp the meaning and connotation of these references. Some of them are religious and are linked to the Jewish tradition (the yarmulke and the Wailing Wall), others are Islamic such as the Golden Dome. *Mameluke*, as a historical reference, means literally slave soldier, a member of one of the armies of slaves that controlled politically and militarily several Muslim states during the middle Ages. Under the Ayyubid sultanate, Mameluke generals used their power to establish a dynasty that ruled Egypt and Syria from 1250 to 1517. They managed to win the Battle of Ain Jalut, thus preventing the Mongols from occupying more lands.

Overall, my translation is marked by both processes of domestication on the stylistic level, and foreignization on the cultural level.

The source text may be found at: <http://www.adab.com/modules.php?name=Sh3er&doWhat=shqas&qid=76853>