Lot's Wife on the Border*

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In January or February of 384 C.E.,[1] the Christian pilgrim known to us as Egeria left Jerusalem, where she had been based, and headed east. According to her own account, she felt impelled by God to climb Mount Nebo. With her traveled "some holy men from Jerusalem, a presbyter and deacons, and several brothers (monks)."[2] The trip, which took them through Jericho and Livias, went very well. Her guides were able to point out further local sites, and, after some instructive detours, they reached their goal.[3] Mount Nebo was high and steep, but the group of pilgrims, now swollen in number by the addition of local monks, made the climb successfully.[4] Close to the summit they found a church commemorating the site of Moses's death.[5] After a short service consisting of readings from Scripture and prayers, the local holy men asked Egeria if she would like to see "the places which are described in

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[1] For the dates of Egeria's pilgrimage, see Paul Devos, "La Date du voyage d'Égérie," *AnBoll* 85 (1967) 165–94.

[2] *Itinerarium Egeriae* (hereafter *Itin. Eg.*) 10.3. The critical edition is that established by Pierre Maraval, *Égérie. Journal de Voyage* (SC 296; Paris: Cerf, 1997). The translation here is taken from *Egeria's Travels* (trans. John Wilkinson; 3rd ed.; Warminster, U.K.: Aris and Phillips, 1999). All other translations are my own unless otherwise attributed.

[3] *Itin. Eg.* 10.8, 11.3.

[4] George Gingras notes that the mountain is the Ras Siagha, a peak two miles west-northwest of the peak today known as En Nebo (*Egeria: Diary of a Pilgrim* [ACW 38; New York: Newman Press, 1970] 191 n. 148).

[5] For the church on Mount Nebo, see Sylvester Saller, "L'Église du Mont Nebo," *RB* 43 (1934) 120–27.

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the Books of Moses."[6] This proposal "delighted" her, and together they climbed up to the actual summit.

From there, the panoramic view was extraordinary. Egeria exclaims over the fact that they could see not only the region surrounding the Jordan, but most of Palestine.[7] But it is precisely at this celebratory moment that one of the greatest disappointments of her three-year pilgrimage occurs. At the prompting of her guides, she directs her gaze southward, towards the distant shores of the Dead Sea.

> To our left was the whole country of the Sodomites, including Zoar [Segor], the only one of the five cities which remains today.[8] There is still something [memoriale][9] left of it, but all that is left of the others is heaps of ruins, because they were burned to ashes. We were also shown the place where Lot's wife had her memorial [titulus], as you read in the Bible. But what we saw, reverend ladies, was not the actual pillar [columna], but only the place [locus] where it had once been. The pillar itself, they say, has been submerged in the Dead Sea—at any rate we did not see it, and I cannot pretend we did. In fact it was the bishop there, the Bishop of Zoar, who told us that it was now a good many years since the pillar had been visible. It used to stand near the sixth milestone from Zoar, but was now completely submerged by water.[10]

Egeria's regret is palpable. She was able to see not the actual pillar that had once been Lot's wife, but only the place where it had been. The failure is painful enough to demand repeating: "we did not see it, and I cannot pretend we did." Egeria's disappointment is all the more noticeable given her usual tone of gratified delight. Why, we must ask, was this sight so important?

Certainly Lot's wife was an established stop on the pilgrimage route. Long before Egeria's travels, Josephus averred, "I have seen the pillar of salt, and it remains

[6] *Itin. Eg.* 12.3.

[7] *Itin. Eg.* 12.5.

[8] The five cities are Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboiim, and Zoar (Gen 14:2). Egeria uses the biblical name, which I have inserted in square brackets. Wilkinson prefers Zoar.

[9] Gingras points out that Egeria uses the word *memoriale* only once. Paul Geyer glosses it with *memoria* (*Itinera Hierosolymitana* [CSEL 39; Vienna: Hoelder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1898] 407). Hélène Pétré suggests it was a commemorative monument (*Éthérie. Journal de voyage* [SC 21; Paris: Cerf, 1974] 143 n. 3).

[10] "In sinistra autem parte vidimus terras Sodomitum omnes nec non et Segor, quae tamen Segor sola de illis quinque in hodie constat. Nam et memoriale ibi est; de ceteris autem illis civitatibus nichil aliud apparet nisi subversio ruinarum, quemadmodum in cinerem converse sunt. Locus etiam, ubi fuit titulus uxoris Loth, ostensus est nobis, qui locus etiam in Scripturis legitur. Sed mihi credite, domine venerabiles, quia columna ipsa iam non paret, locus autem ipse tantum ostenditur: columna autem ipsa dicitur mari Mortuo fuisse quooperta. Certe locum <cum> videremus, columnam nullam vidimus, et ideo fallere vos super hanc rem non possum. Nam episcopus loci ipsius, id est de Segor, dixit nobis quoniam iam aliquot anni essent, a quo non pareret columna illa. Nam de Segor forsitan sexto millario ipse locus <est>, ubi stetit columna illa, quod nunc totum cooperit aqua" (*Itin. Eg.* 12.5–7 [trans. Wilkinson]).

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to this day";[11] according to Irenaeus, it could still be seen in the second century.[12] More than a century after Egeria, Theodosius asserted that the pillar continued to stand on the shores of the Dead Sea, but that it waxed and waned with the moon.[13] The Piacenza pilgrim, writing after 570 C.E., was adamant that the sight was still visible. In his words: "People make a mistake about Lot's wife thinking she becomes smaller through animals licking her, but that is not correct, for she stays the same as she was."[14] While he does not explicitly say that he himself saw the pillar, his unusual and categorical insistence that it could be seen is perfectly clear. Egeria's disappointment at not seeing this monument has thus often been viewed as the understandable result of thwarted touristic desire. As an explanation, however, this has almost no value, since it simply rephrases her reaction in secular terms. Because it does not address the fundamental question of what made the pillar of salt of compelling interest (apart from directing attention to its established position on the pilgrimage circuit), it cannot illuminate the source of Egeria's dissatisfaction.[15] Nor can it explain Egeria's decision to offer compensating information, such as the pillar's coordinates, or to raise the disquieting possibility that authors might deceive their readers. This complex reaction to the sight, I argue, arises from the location of Lot's wife. Not only does the pillar of salt stand on the edge of the Dead Sea, but it also marks other crucial borders. If we are to appreciate the sources of Egeria's engagement and disappointment, we must return to her text and attend to these borders.

The first border concerns identity. In contemporary biblical exegesis, Sodom and Gomorrah serve as figures for "the world," from which Lot and his wife had purposefully turned away. In this reading, the fate of Lot's wife had particular resonance for the newly baptized as well as for consecrated women, both of whom had turned away from the secular world. This reading directs our attention to Egeria's own biography and, in particular, to the question of her identity.

[11] Josephus, *Ant*. 1.203 (Thackeray, LCL). Among the blessings prescribed by the Babylonian Talmud is one to be said upon seeing the pillar of salt that had once been Lot's wife (*b*. *Ber*. 54a).

[12] Irenaeus, *Haer*. 4.31.3.

[13] Theodosius, *De situ terrae sanctae* 20; see also Irenaeus, *Haer*. 4.33.9.

[14] *Itinerarium Placentini* (hereafter *Itin*. *Plac*.) 15. The critical edition is that established by Paul Geyer and Otto Cuntz (CCSL 175; Turnhout: Brepols, 1965). The translation is taken from *Jerusalem Pilgrims before the Crusades* (John Wilkinson; Warminster, U.K.: Aris and Phillips, 2002) 138. Commenting on this passage, Wilkinson writes: "The pilgrim seems here to be passing on information he had been given about the view to the left and on Lot's wife. There is no indication that he himself had seen Lot's wife, nor does he say where she is to be seen" (ibid., n. 27).

[15] There does seem to have been an established circuit. Egeria notes, e.g., that even before her trip to the Sinai, she knew that Jebel Musa was not visible until after it had been climbed, "because of what the brethren [fratribus] had said" (*Itin*. *Eg*. 2.7). The words of the bishop of Edessa also suggest that there was a known circuit: "Therefore, if you are willing, we will show you whatever places there are here that Christians like to see" (quaecumque loca sunt hic grata ad videndum Christianis) (*Itin*. *Eg*. 19.5 [trans. Gingras]).

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The second border is topographical. The pillar of salt stands on the southeast border of the Holy Land. From her elevated position on Mount Nebo, Egeria's gaze is dominating as well as delighted. As she surveys the land beneath her feet, she effectively creates a kind of map—but one in which an anchoring figure is missing. In place of the pillar, the bishop thus supplies its coordinates, which she, in turn, passes on to her readers. This reading highlights the dynamic collaboration of monks and pilgrims in the construction of the Christian Holy Land.

The third border is textual. It identifies a seam in the narrative structure of the account. For it is precisely at this moment of dashed hopes that Egeria addresses her readers directly, assuring them of the authenticity of her witness. By acknowledging the limitation of her autopsy, she accrues credibility. This reading directs our attention to the relationship between the text and its readers, to issues of narrativity.

The fourth border is temporal. As a memorial of divine condemnation, the destruction of Sodom certainly looks both back to primeval time, but it also looks forward to the Last Judgment. Contemporary Christian preachers used the site to encourage reflection not only upon ethical obligations, but also upon the nature of God as judge. These reflections were inevitably conditioned by the spectacles of public disciplinary action in the late Roman Empire, which were designed to promote an image of mercy as well as justice. This reading shows how early Christian pilgrimage sites located not just the past but perhaps more importantly the future in the land, and illustrates how this imagined future was conditioned by current political practice.

Lot's Wife in Patristic Exegesis

The significance of Lot's wife to fourth-century Christians becomes apparent when we turn to the preaching of Egeria's contemporaries. John Chrysostom, for example, often recalls the fate of Sodom. For him, the meaning of the destruction of the Cities of the Plain is conveyed less by the unruly actions of the citizens than by the contrasting reactions of Lot and his wife. Whereas Lot acted admirably with eager hospitality, inviting in the angelic visitors and heeding their warning to flee without a backward glance, his wife responded culpably with slack indifference (ῥαθυμία). Disregarding the explicit injunction of the angels, she looked back "and accordingly paid the penalty for her indifference."[16] It was with similar negligence that the first couple sinned. Despite the clear command of God and the threatened consequences, the man and the woman paid no heed and ate the fruit.[17] Such

[16] John Chrysostom, *Hom. Gen.* 43.6; see also ibid., 42.5, 44.1. For Lot's admirable reaction, see ibid., 43.5.

[17] "It was not the tree that caused the harm, but slothful will [ῥᾳθυμος] and contempt displayed for God's command" (*Hom. Gen.* 16.6; the translation is taken from *Homilies on Genesis 1–17* [trans. Robert C. Hill; FC 74; Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1986] 220). As Robert Hill remarks: "Again, as we have seen so often, *rhathumia*, 'indifference,' is for Chrysostom the universal cause of human failing (*Homilies on Genesis 18–45* [trans. Robert C. Hill; FC 82; Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1990] 430 n. 31).

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careless indolence continued to wreak havoc in the cities of Chrysostom's day. The majority still perished "because of indifference" notwithstanding the fact that the presence of even one person "inflamed with zeal" could correct and save a whole community.[18] Thus, for Chrysostom, it is the judgment passed on indifference that commands attention and gives the story of Lot's wife its universal hortatory value. Contemplation of the pillar of salt is beneficial in that it stimulates zeal.

Cyril of Jerusalem also assumes the utility of Lot's wife as an example for all Christians, but especially for the newly baptized. In his first mystagogical address, he explicitly directs the neophytes' attention to the pillar of salt "as a monument set up for ever" of the effects of bad choices (πονηρᾶς προαιρέσεως) and turning back. Having gained the mountain like Lot and his daughters, they must watch themselves and not return to the "salty ways of this life."[19] In this reading, the pillar crystallizes not only the misdirected will and the act of turning back, but also the tempting savor of the world.

Jerome concurs that the story is indeed about a decisive rejection of worldly life. "In every place," he observes, "where Egypt, Sodom and Gomorrah are named together, it is not these spots, but the present world, which is meant."[20] But for him, to flee from the world entails not just baptism but also ascetic renunciation. In their escape from a doomed city "to the mountain," Lot and his family provide a model for all subsequent monastic withdrawal.[21] When Lot's wife looked back, Jerome assumes she did so in a gesture of regret.[22] Her summary punishment

[18] John Chrysostom, *Stat*. 1.12 (PG 49:34). Chrysostom repeatedly identifies ῥαθυμία as the cause of the riot of the statues; see, for example, ibid., 2.4, 3.7 (PG 49:38, 57).

[19] ἡ δὲ τούτου γυνὴ στήλη γέγονεν ἁλός, ἐστηλιτευμένη δι' αἰῶνος, ἔχουσα τῆς πονηρᾶς προαιρέσεως καὶ ὑποστροφῆς, τὴν μνήμην. . . . Πρόσεχε τοίνυν σεαυτῷ, καὶ μὴ στρέφου πάλιν, . . . εἰς τὴν ἁλμυρὰν τοῦ βίου τούτου πρᾶξιν (Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catech*. 1.8).

[20] Jerome, *Ep*. 46.7; see also idem, *Tract*. *Ps*. 80. The conjunction of Sodom and Egypt is suggested by Gen 13:10 (which describes Sodom as being, initially, "like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt") and also by Rev 11:8 (which describes Rome as "the great city that is prophetically called Sodom and Egypt").

[21] The LXX version of Gen 19:17, which has "mountain" instead of "hills," facilitates an ascetic interpretation, as we see in Jerome (*Ep*. 22.1) and also in Chrysostom (*Hom*. *Gen*. 43.6, 43.1). We find this reading already in Tertullian, *Marc*. 4.23.11.

[22] Pursuing his pacific agenda, Clement of Rome interprets the backward glance as a sign of double-mindedness. Because Lot's wife did not persevere in unanimity with her husband, she became "a judgment and a sign [σημέιωσιν]" for all generations (Clement of Rome, *Ep*. *ad Cor*. 11, in *The Apostolic Fathers* [ed. and trans. Joseph B. Lightfoot; 2nd ed.; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1989] Pt 1, 2.46–47). Origen puzzled over the fate of Lot's wife: "Do we think there was so much evil in this transgression, that the woman, because she looked behind her, incurred the destruction which she appeared to be fleeing by divine favor? For what great crime was it, if the concerned mind of the woman looked backward whence she was being terrified by the excessive crackling of the flames?" He solved the puzzle by reading the event through the lens offered by Luke 17:32 and thus equating Lot with rational resolve and a virile soul (*rationabilis est sensus et animus virilis*) and his wife with fleshly desire (*carnis imaginem*) that always turns back (*retrorsum respicit*) from the Kingdom of God and seeks after pleasure (*Hom*. *Gen*. 5.2; the translation is taken from *Homilies on Geneis and Exodus* [trans. Ronald Heine; FC 71; Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press,

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thus provides a fitting cautionary tale for virgins, who might be contemplating a diminution in their ascetic labors or even a return to worldly life. Thus to the young virgin Eustochium, Jerome writes: "My purpose is to show you that you are fleeing from Sodom and should take warning from Lot's wife."[23]

Elsewhere, Jerome recalls the figure of Lot's wife to encourage ascetics who had lapsed from their discipline. It was with this agenda that he wrote to Rusticus, in Gaul.[24] Rusticus and his wife, Artemia, had voluntarily taken a vow of sexual continence, which they subsequently broke. Jerome describes this lapse as the decision "to live in Gomorrah." Both repented of their incontinence: Artemia went to Palestine to do penance for her sin, where she met Jerome; but Rusticus failed to follow, as he had promised. In his letter, Jerome casts Artemia as Lot, who, having narrowly escaped destruction, now sought to save her spouse. She was like Lot, who, having refused "to leave blazing Sodom and Gomorrah until he was himself half-on-fire, tried to lead forth one who was tied and bound by her past sins." In giving in to despair, Rusticus had become like Lot's wife, who "lost her composure, and looking back became a monument of an unbelieving soul."[25] In Jerome's retelling of the biblical story, the virtue of Lot is as apparent as the vice of his wife. Such admiration for Lot was widespread in this period. On the Madaba map, "the shrine of Saint Lot" is carefully delineated in the hills east of Zoar.[26] The figure of Lot could be used to praise the ascetic resolve of women as well as men, even as the fate of Lot's wife could be used to correct male as well as female lapses of ascetic discipline. But the rhetorical impact of Jerome's transgendered use should not be minimized; he intends that Rusticus should feel ashamed.

A story recounted two centuries later by the anonymous pilgrim from Piacenza supports an ascetic reading of the entire region of the Pentapolis. A noblewoman, named Mary, was betrothed to be married. But when her husband died on their wedding night, she turned to asceticism. Within a week, she had sold her husband's property, manumitted his slaves, and dispersed the proceeds to the poor and the monasteries. Then, dressed in her husband's clothes, she took up a life of ascetic wandering. "It is said that she . . . moves about in the region of Segor by the Salt Sea among the reedy places and the palm groves."[27] This story of ascetic conversion contains many typical elements: for maximal impact, it occurs on the actual wedding night, and it strongly links sexual and material renunciation;

1982] 114; see also *Homélies sur la Genèse* [ed. Louis Doutreleau, S.J.; SC 7bis; Paris: Cerf, 1943]).

[23] *Ep*. 22.2.

[24] *Ep*. 122.

[25] Jerome, *Ep*. 122.1. Jerome identifies despair rather than indifference as the emotion that impeded Lot's wife, but he agrees with Chrysostom about the impact of even one ardent soul: "As if to make up for the loss of a single woman, Lot's glowing faith freed the whole city of Segor."

[26] Konstantinos D. Politis, "The Sanctuary of Agios Lot, the City of Zoara, and Zared River," in *The Madaba Map Centenary, 1897–1997* (ed. Michele Piccirillo and Eugenio Alliata; Jerusalem: Studium Biblicum Franciscanum, 1999) 225–27.

[27] *Itin. Plac*. 34 (trans. Wilkinson).

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even Mary's transvestitism corresponds to a known hagiographic genre.[28] What is unusual is the geographical locale. Segor, as one of the cities of the Pentapolis, directs attention back to the story of Sodom. In his Latin version of Eusebius's *Onomasticon*, Jerome describes it as "one of the five cities of the Sodomites, which was saved from the fire by the prayers of Lot, and which is pointed out even now."[29] The ruins of the city thus point as much to the virtue of Lot, understood by early Christians in markedly ascetic terms, as to the sinfulness of its inhabitants. In this context, Mary's ascetic regime takes on a more specific charge. Her chastity and charity seem designed to redress the specific license and inhospitality of Sodom, even as her perpetual wandering expiates the culpable turning back and subsequent rootedness of Lot's wife.

Such a well-established connection between Lot's wife, monastic renunciation, and baptism would suggest that Egeria's reaction to the missing pillar sprang from her own life story. In the Jerusalem portion of her text, she displays a pointed interest in baptism. As Hagith Sivan notes:

> This is evident not only from the length of the description, but also from several remarks which Egeria intersperses in it. In the first place, she feels "obliged" to inform her readers about the process while stressing its inner logic: "lest you think, lady sisters, that this is done without reason, it was my duty to explain." Then she draws attention to strangers, like herself, who seek baptism, but for whom the required testimony of good character might not be easily acquired. Then she adds that baptismal learning is called catechesis, a term apparently unknown to her circle.[30]

On the basis of this marked interest, as well as other evidence, Sivan argues that Egeria was not a nun, as is commonly assumed, but rather a pious laywoman, writing to a circle of women who shared her commitment to scriptural devotions.[31] Sivan suggests, moreover, that Egeria may have been baptized in Jerusalem at the end of her three-year stay, a length of time that would neatly correspond to the necessary period of catechetical instruction. If Egeria had been among those preparing for baptism, the fact that Cyril, who was then bishop in Jerusalem, invoked Lot's wife as a cautionary figure for neophytes would surely have heightened her interest in the sight and her equally vivid disappointment in its absence.

[28] John Anson, "The Female Transvestite in Early Monasticism: The Origin and Development of a Motif," *Viator* 5 (1974) 1–32. Evelyne Patlagean, "L'Histoire de la femme déguisée en moine et l'évolution de la sainteté feminine à Byzance," *Studi medievali*, 3rd ser., 17 (1976) 597–623. Stephen Davis, "Crossed Texts, Crossed Sex: Intertextuality and Gender in Early Christian Legends of Holy Women Disguised as Men," *JECS* 10 (2002) 1–36.

[29] *The Onomasticon by Eusebius of Caesarea* (ed. Joan E. Taylor; trans. Greville Stewart Parker Freeman-Grenville; Jerusalem: Carta, 2003) 85.

[30] Hagith Sivan, "Holy Land Pilgrimage and Western Audiences: Some Reflections on Egeria and Her Circle," *CQ* 38 (1988) 528–35, at 530. See also eadem, "Who was Egeria? Piety and Pilgrimage in the Time of Gratian," *HTR* 81 (1988) 59–72.

[31] Sivan, "Holy Land Pilgrimage," 528–35.

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Sivan's intriguing arguments, however, have not proved entirely convincing and many scholars continue to believe that Egeria was a nun writing to her religious compatriots back home.[32] As a woman under vows, her desire to see Lot's wife would also be quite explicable given the kind of contemporary exegetical strategies glimpsed in Jerome: the desiccated remains would have spoken to the crucial importance of fidelity to an ascetic lifestyle. The perceived relevance of this sight for all religious women would also explain Egeria's invocation of her readers at precisely this point. Knowing that they shared her interest and thus would also share her disappointment, she addresses them directly: "But what we saw, reverend ladies [domine venerabiles], was not the actual pillar [columna], but only the place [locus] where it had once been." Exegetical explanations of Lot's wife can thus be marshaled as indirect evidence in support of Egeria's identity, whether as a newly baptized Christian or as a consecrated religious, and of her communal affiliation.

The peculiar topographical features of the southern shores of the Dead Sea also entered into patristic exegesis. In Chrysostom's eyes, the absence of vegetation was entirely appropriate: because "the people inhabiting this region had given evidence of much fruit of wickedness," God made "the fruit of the earth useless."[33] But even without this moral reading, the area around the Dead Sea was a marvel, and it is also in this context that we must place Lot's wife.

Lot's Wife as a Border Figure

Our earliest Christian pilgrimage account is that of the Bordeaux pilgrim, who traveled to the Holy Land in 333 of our era. His style is notably spare, but he does describe the unusual properties of the Dead Sea. As the pilgrim's only true geographical description, these comments command attention:

> Its water is extremely bitter, fish are nowhere to be found in it, and no ships sail there. If anyone goes to swim in it, the water turns him over [eum versat].[34]

[32] Sivan pointed to Egeria's "unusual freedom of movement and obvious affluence" as militating against monastic affiliation, but more recent studies have sharpened our understanding of mobility as a widespread form of monastic practice. See Maribel Dietz, *Wandering Monks, Virgins, and Pilgrims: Ascetic Travel in the Mediterranean World, A.D. 300–800* (University Park, Pa.: Penn State Press, 2005) esp. 48–54; Daniel Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks: Spiritual Authority and the Promotion of Monasticism in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

[33] John Chrysostom, *Hom. Gen.* 43.6 (trans. Hill). This somewhat odd description (τοὺς καρποὺς ἀχρήστους) may refer to the fruit of Sodom, which Chrysostom mentions elsewhere (*Inan. glor.* 3; *De perfecta caritate* 7; see also Tertullian, *Apol.* 40.7).

[34] *Itinerarium Burdigalense* (hereafter *Itin. Burd.*) 597. The critical edition is that established by Paul Geyer and Otto Cuntz (CCSL 175; Turnhout: Brepols, 1965). Wilkinson provides a partial translation in his *Egeria's Travels*. This description strikingly resembles that of the early Passion of Pionius, where the author writes as an eyewitness: "I saw too the Dead Sea, a body of water . . . unable to nurture any living thing, indeed, anything thrust into it is expelled upwards by the water, and it cannot hold even a man's body within it" (*Passio Pionii* 4.20, in *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* [ed. and trans. Herbert Musurillo; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972] 140–43). The parallel

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Certainly the morphology of the area inspired wonder. Centuries earlier, Pliny the Elder had noted the medicinal hot springs, the harvesting of bitumen, the unnatural buoyancy of the dread waters (*lacum dirum*), and the "noxious exhalations of the coast." [35] Two centuries after the traveler from Bordeaux, the Piacenza pilgrim elaborates on these markers of wildness: the darkness that hovers over the region, the sulfuric smell, the deposits of asphalt and pitch, and the unusual astringency and density of the water.[36] The striking quality of this inland sea is equally apparent in its depiction on the Madaba map: not only is it larger than the scale would warrant, but the artist has carefully provided all three of its names: "[The Lake of] Salt, also Pitch-lake, also the Dead Sea."

Despite the sensory richness of the pilgrims' descriptions, which would seem to imply autopsy, we cannot be certain whether either of these pilgrims visited the area. It is quite possible that the pilgrims are simply repeating information supplied by their guides.[37] Indeed, paleo-environmental research indicates that the road on the western side of the Dead Sea, which had been well traveled in earlier centuries, had become impassable in the Byzantine period (the fourth to the seventh centuries), due to the elevated level of water in the lake.[38] What is clear, however, is the function of the region in their pilgrims' texts. As a place of wonder, where the natural order of things falters, it definitively marks the southeastern edge of the Holy Land. It demarcates a boundary. Thus, it is precisely at this point that the Bordeaux pilgrim turns back, to begin the journey home. Like the would-be swimmer of his own description, the waters of the Dead Sea turn him back (*eum versat*).

There is no evidence that Egeria actually traveled to the shores of the Dead Sea on this trip, or on any other.[39] Nor does she evince interest in the physical properties of that inland sea. Her focus rests entirely on Lot's wife, and her perspective remains a distant one. The importance of the pillar of salt unfolds entirely within the context of Egeria's panoramic view from Mount Nebo. From there, she writes, "you can see most of Palestine, the Promised Land, and everything in the area of Jordan as far

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is so close, one wonders whether the odd verb *versat* in the *Itin. Burd.* should read *versus expulsat*.

[35] Pliny, *Nat.* 5.15.71–73 (Rackham, LCL). See also Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.7; Strabo, *Geogr.* 1.16.2 par. 44; Philo, *Abr.* 28; *Mos.* 2.10.

[36] *Itin. Plac.* 10, 15, 24. The pilgrim also mentions the reputedly curative properties of these waters.

[37] This is suggested by John Wilkinson (*Egeria's Travels*, 33 n. 3; idem, *Jerusalem Pilgrims Before the Crusades*, 135 n. 22).

[38] Yizhar Hirschfeld, "The Archaeology of the Dead Sea Valley in the Late Hellenistic and Early Roman Periods," in *New Frontiers in Dead Sea Paleoenvironmental Research* (ed. Yehouda Enzel, Amotz Agnon, and Mordecai Stein; Geological Society of America Special Papers 401; Boulder, Colo.: Geological Society of America, 2006) 215–29, at 217. There was also a road running along the eastern side of the lake, but this route was less used and "probably more problematic, since the cliffs there descend directly into the water in several places" (ibid., 217–18). Passengers could, however, have traveled easily by boat.

[39] In the portion of the text that is lost, Egeria does seem to have made a trip to the West Bank and Transjordan (Günter Stemberger, *Jews and Christians in the Holy Land: Palestine in the Fourth Century* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000] 96).

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as the eye can see."[40] But how far can the eye actually see? The southern tip of the Dead Sea lies about fifty to sixty miles from Mount Nebo, and the stark difference in elevation would further magnify this distance.[41] At such a remove, surely no one could have seen a pillar of salt. Does Egeria's distress spring less from her inability to see the sight than from her awareness of its absence as a marker?

Indeed, she suggests as much. For in compensation for the missing sight, she first gives its topographical coordinates: that it used to stand near the sixth milestone from Zoar. And then she supplements this information with the authorizing testimony of the bishop of Zoar (ancient Segor), that it had been "a good many years since the pillar had been visible" and that it "was now completely submerged by water."[42] This testimony is unusually careful. While admitting that the pillar cannot be seen and has not been seen for many years, the bishop nevertheless insists that it still exists under the concealing water. Egeria's own words replicate this precision: while admitting that she did not see the actual *columna*, she still insists that she "was shown the place where Lot's wife had her *titulus*."[43]

Titulus is an unusual word. Wilkinson translates it as "memorial," in apposition with the absent pillar, and Gingras also assumes that both *columna* and *titulus* refer to the pillar of salt.[44] But the word *titulus* usually refers to an inscribed tablet, often of a judicial nature, and it is in this more precise sense that Egeria uses the term later in her account to refer to the inscription affixed to the cross of Jesus.[45] The presence of a commemorative tablet at the site is, however, otherwise unattested and, given the distance, would have been invisible. It is possible that we should understand *titulus* in its most general sense, as meaning something like "claim to fame."[46] To locate her infamy, the bishop would have needed only to make some gesture towards the designated area.

[40] *Itin. Eg.* 12.5 (trans. Wilkinson).

[41] Egeria's testimony is thus crucial for Edmond Power, who argued forcefully that the Cities of the Plain were located north of the Dead Sea ("The Site of the Pentapolis," *Bib* 11 [1930] 23–62, 149–82, esp. 49–52). See also Josef Ziegler, "Die *Peregrinatio Aetheriae* und das *Onomastikon* des Eusebius," *Bib* 12 (1931) 70–84, at 78–79; L. Heidet, "Ségor," *DB* 5.1561–65. Even if this northern location is correct, it would still represent a boundary, as is evident in Basil's characterization of Segor as "lying on the border of Palestine" (*Comm. Isa.* 15.5).

[42] Félix-Marie Abel notes the sudden appearance of the bishop, who was not initially listed among the priests, deacons, and monks who accompanied Egeria up the mountain, and suggests that Egeria might be supplying information derived from a later meeting with the bishop in Jerusalem ("L'Exploration du sud-est de la vallée du Jourdain," *RB* 40 [1931] 374–400, at 384).

[43] In Carrhae, the local bishop showed Egeria another absent sight: "the place from which Rachel stole the idols of her father" (ostensus est etiam michi locus, unde furata est Rachel idola patris sui) (*Itin. Eg.* 21.4). Here, of course, the absence was the sight.

[44] *Itin. Eg.* 12.6: "Locus etiam, ubi fuit titulus uxoris Loth, ostensus est nobis"; see Gingras, *Diary*, 193 n. 158).

[45] *Itin. Eg.* 37.1, 3.

[46] *OLD* s.v. *titulus* (7). Abel draws the parallel with Egeria's description of the panorama from Mount Sinai at the end of chapter 3, which also seems improbably extensive ("L'Exploration du sud-est," 380–87, esp. 384).

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Egeria's disappointment on Mount Nebo might thus be understood quite plausibly as a reaction to a missing marker. The absent pillar leaves one edge of the Holy Land undefined and renders her panoramic view of the Promised Land incomplete. Because she has not experienced this pleasing unity, she cannot replicate it for her readers, and so she speaks to them directly, asking for their understanding or perhaps their forgiveness. But however plausible this interpretation might seem, it would be a mistake to interpret Egeria's sweeping gaze as simply one of innocent delight. It is also dominating. She looks to all points of the compass and even changes her position to get a better view. From her lofty perch she gains a sense of visual control over the region: she can see "most of Palestine, the Promised Land and everything in the area of Jordan."[47] But she cannot see the figure that marks the southeast border.

Female figures, as Annie McClintock observes, have long been used to mark borders and boundaries in imperial contexts.[48] They identify and make real the imaginal threshold where the orderly, known world gives way to impassible regions, characterized by disorder and monstrosity. The unusual physical properties of the Dead Sea, with its striking saline deposits and periodic discharge of asphalt, might well bespeak such a reversal of norms.[49] A sense of dread is conveyed by early writers (if not travelers), who note the low-lying haze, as if of smoke, the land "deprived of all produce and water," as if "scorched by fire," and the unpleasant odor.[50] Certainly the figure of a woman turned into a pillar of salt strikes a warning note. Boundaries in the ancient world typically evoked precisely this combination of "fear, fascination, and reverence," as James Romm has observed.[51]

A sensitivity to borders is evident elsewhere in Egeria's text.[52] To her question about the location of the house of Terah, the father of Abraham, the bishop of Edessa responds:

> The place you ask about is ten staging-posts from here, inside the frontiers of Persia. From here to Nisibis is five staging-posts, and it is five more from there to Ur, the city of the Chaldees; but at present Romans are not allowed

[47] *Itin. Eg.* 12.5.

[48] Annie McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995) 21–28.

[49] One of the most unusual features of the Dead Sea is its periodic discharge of asphalt. Pieces range in size from small pebbles to massive chunks (Itzhaq Beit-Arieh, "The Dead Sea Region: An Archaeological Perspective," in *The Dead Sea: The Lake and Its Setting* [ed. Tina M. Niemi, Zvi Ben-Avraham, and Joel Gat; Oxford Monographs on Geology and Geophysics 36; New York: Oxford University Press, 1997] 251; Arie Nissenbaum, "The Dead Sea Asphalts—Historical Aspects," *American Association of Petroleum Geologists Bulletin* 62 [1978] 837–44).

[50] *Passio Pionii* 4.17–20 (trans. Musurillo). For the distinctive smell of the region, see *Itin. Plac.* 15; Tertullian, *Apol.* 40.7. On the region generally, see Tertullian, *Pall.* 2.4.

[51] James E. Romm, *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992) 9–26, at 26.

[52] On her trip through the Sinai, she notes the fort marking the frontier between Egypt and "the land of the Saracens" (*Itin. Eg.* 7.6).

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> to go there, since that whole area belongs to the Persians. In fact this region is specially called the "Eastern" province because it lies on the Roman frontier with Persia and Chaldea.[53]

The precision of the bishop's response and the care with which Egeria has preserved it are equally striking. Once again, rich topographical detail seems supplied in deliberate compensation for autopsy. But in this case, the impediment is not physical decay but rather political demarcation; Egeria cannot visit Terah's homeland because it lies beyond the Roman imperium.

From the top of Mount Nebo, however, she can survey the Christian empire. Her monastic guides position themselves as authoritative interpreters: "Would you like to see the places which are described in the Books of Moses? If so . . . we will tell you which places you can see."[54] Their confidence in identifying places rested upon guild knowledge: "a tradition handed down by their predecessors."[55] In Egeria's ready assent, we glimpse the collaboration of monks and pilgrims in creating the Christian Holy Land. Again, it is Hagith Sivan who has laid out the diverse strategies of this process: where no site was securely established, monks invented one; where several sites existed, they selected one; and where a site was already enshrined by Jewish practice, they established a different one.[56] On the top of Mount Nebo, they invent, identifying a level area as the place where "Moses and the children of Israel had their camp when they were fighting the cities [of the Amorites]."[57] Egeria willingly accepts the inscription, noting that she "could see traces [signa] of the camp."[58] In place of the distant city of Edrei, the biblical city of Og, they substitute a different, more proximate settlement, namely that of Safdra.[59]

The absence of Lot's wife on the southeast border marks a rupture in this creative process. In so doing, it establishes a different border, namely, the point at which the land refuses to yield itself to Christian appropriation. No wonder Egeria feels

[53] "Haec autem pars specialiter orientalis appellatur, quae est in confinium Romanorum et Persarum vel Chaldeorum" (*Itin. Eg.* 20.12 [trans. Wilkinson]).

[54] *Itin. Eg.* 12.3 (trans. Wilkinson).

[55] This claim is made on Mount Nebo concerning the grave of Moses. According to Deut 34:6, no one knows the place of Moses's burial. The monks agree that his actual tomb (*memoria illius, ubi positus est*) remains unknown, but claim that they can nevertheless show pilgrims the area. They support this assertion by saying, "Since where he was placed was shown to us by the older monks who dwelt here, we can therefore show it to you; and the older monks themselves said that such a tradition had been handed down to them by their predecessors" (sicut enim nobis a maioribus, qui hic manserunt, ubi ostensum est, ita et nos vobis monstramus: qui et ipsi tamen maiores ita sibi traditum a maioribus suis) (*Itin. Eg.* 12.2 [trans. Gingras]).

[56] See Hagith S. Sivan, "Pilgrimage, Monasticism, and the Emergence of Christian Palestine in the 4th Century," in *The Blessings of Pilgrimage* (ed. Robert Ousterhout; Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1990) 54–65.

[57] Compare Num 21:20, where the Israelites are said to have camped in "the valley lying in the region of Moab by the top of Pisgah that overlooks the wasteland."

[58] *Itin. Eg.* 12.9–10 (trans. Wilkinson).

[59] Wilkinson points out that Edrei, lying 40 miles distant, cannot be seen from the mountain (*Egeria's Travels*, 123 n. 5).

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frustration and disappointment and assumes that her sisters will feel likewise. And no wonder she immediately supplies the bishop's testimony. His sure knowledge of the pillar's coordinates, his insistence of its continued, albeit hidden, existence, constitutes a reassuring affirmation of episcopal control over the terrain.

As an author, Egeria shares the bishop's ability to identify invisible sights, since it is only through her words that her sisters back home "see" the land. Her willingness to acknowledge the limitations of her vision serves a further narrative end: it effectively seals the authenticity of her account.

Disappointment and Narrative Authenticity

When Egeria addresses her readers directly, in the midst of her description of the missing sight, she assumes that they too believe that the remains of Lot's wife were still visible. They think this because it is written in Scripture.[60] Egeria's own experience has proved otherwise: "Believe me, reverend ladies, the pillar [columna] itself is not visible now, but only the place [locus] where it had once been." A sentence later she repeats the point: "We did indeed see the place, but we did not see any pillar, and on this matter I cannot deceive you."[61] While disappointment attends this admission, as we have noted, it is also a moment of authorial power. Because Egeria has been there, she knows things that non-travelers do not know.[62] She can emend Scripture on the basis of her own autopsy.

Earlier in her text, Egeria used her status as an eyewitness to add to the biblical text. Her tour of the Sinai enabled her to give a precise description of the place where Aaron had waited with the seventy elders, while Moses was up on the mountain speaking with God. In this place, she notes, there is "an enormous round rock with a flat place on top where the holy men are said to have stood."[63] She may even have drawn attention to the supplemental nature of this detail by explicitly acknowledging that "*it is not mentioned in Scripture*."[64] This information, like the

[60] "Locus etiam, ubi fuit titulus uxoris Loth, ostensus est nobis, qui locus etiam in Scripturis legitur" (*Itin. Eg.* 12.6).

[61] "Certe locum <cum> videremus, columnan nullam vidimus, et ideo fallere vos super hanc rem non possum" (*Itin. Eg.* 12.7).

[62] See the remarks of Dean MacCannell on "truth markers" (*The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* [New York: Schocken, 1989] 137–41).

[63] *Itin. Eg.* 4.4 (trans. Wilkinson).

[64] Gingras, *Diary*, 54 [italics added]. The pertinent line of the text actually reads: "In eo ergo loco, licet et tectum not sit" (SC 296:140). Wilkinson thus translates it as, "There is no building there." Wilhelm Heraeus first conjectured that *tectum* should be *lectum* ("Zur sogenannten *Peregrinatio Aetheriae*," *Archiv für lateinische Lexikographie und Grammatik* 15 [1908] 549–59). This emendation seems plausible, given the fact that there is indeed no mention of a huge flat rock in Exod 24:1 and there seems no reason to expect a building. Maraval, however, notes that when Egeria appeals to Scripture, she always uses the formula *scriptum est* (as at 2.5, 4.2, 5.6). He also notes that the dimensions and flatness of the rock had led to the construction of an open-air altar. The fact that it remained uncovered, he suspects, drew Egeria's attention. Thus he prefers to retain the original reading (SC 296:140 n. 1).

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"invented sites" visible from Mount Nebo, reinforces the scriptural record: Exodus 24:1 says that the seventy elders did not go up the mountain; Egeria can now testify to the fact that she saw the very place where "they worshipped at a distance." In another direct address, Egeria overtly states her belief in the coincidence of her own vision and scriptural testimony. When she finds her memory flagging and can no longer remember everything she has seen, she urges her readers to turn to Scripture, promising that "when Your Charity reads the holy books of Moses, she will perceive, carefully written, all that was done there."[65]

On her later trip to Haran, physical testimony is used more boldly to fill in missing information. In response to Egeria's query about the movements of Nahor and Bethuel, the bishop of Carrhae agrees that "the canonical scriptures" do not reveal when the men came to the region, but, he adds, "it is clear that they did come here later on, since we actually have their tombs here, about a mile from the city."[66] The phrase *Scriptura canonis* attracts attention, not only because it was a relatively new phrase (first used only in the mid-fourth century to designate the list of recognized biblical books, as Wilkinson notes), but also because it implicitly acknowledges the role of non-canonical literature in establishing or buttressing holy sites. Here material evidence joins with extra-canonical traditions to supplement the biblical record.

From her perch on Mount Nebo, however, Egeria erases rather than adds. Despite scriptural testimony to the contrary ("as you read in the Bible"), she insists that the pillar of salt is not visible.[67] "We did not see it," she admits, "and I cannot pretend we did." Immediately, she attaches a defense of the truthfulness of Scripture: according to the bishop, the memorial of Lot's wife is still there, although hidden by water. But if the pillar of salt is still there, why does she emphasize its absence and her consequent failure of autopsy? And why does she raise the suspicion of bad faith, that authors can engage in pretense and deceive their readers?

At several other points in her text, Egeria explicitly raises the question of doubt. When describing the vista from Mount Sinai, she acknowledges that her account strains credibility, but reassures her readers that "Hard as this may be to believe [ut credi vix possit], the holy men did point out each of these things to us."[68] She again asks for her readers' trust when describing the meandering route of the ancient Hebrews:

[65] "[S]ed cum legat affectio vestra libros sanctos Moysi, omnia diligentius pervidet, quae ibi facta sunt" (*Itin. Eg.* 5.8 [trans. Gingras]). Cf. Wilkinson: "But it may help you, loving sisters, the better to picture what happened in these places when you read the Books of holy Moses" (*Egeria's Travels*, 113).

[66] "Non dicit Scriptura canonis. . . . Sed manifeste" (*Itin. Eg.* 20.10 [trans. Wilkinson]).

[67] "Locus etiam, ubi fuit titulus uxoris Loth, ostensus est nobis, qui locus etiam in Scipturis legitur" (*Itin. Eg.* 12.6). Genesis 19:26 reads simply, "But Lot's wife, behind him, looked back, and she became a pillar of salt" (NRSV).

[68] *Itin. Eg.* 3.8 (trans. Gingras). Wilkinson, following Maraval's punctuation, takes this clause as referring to the sight of distant lands "all unbelievably far below us" (*Egeria's Travels*, 111).

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> I hope Your Charity will believe me that, as far as I was able to see, the children of Israel marched along in this manner, going a certain distance to the right, then going an equal distance to the left, going ahead a certain distance, then backtracking an equal distance.[69]

She repeats this request in her final entry written from Jerusalem: "[I hope Your Charity will believe me] that there is no Christian who has come as far as the holy places of Jerusalem who does not go to Edessa to pray."[70] In each case, she is petitioning her readers' confidence. Despite the apparent unlikeliness of her claim, they should "believe her." Egeria clearly wants her readers to trust her words, but can we?

Roland Barthes has famously examined how literary authors construct a sense of plausibility by adding "unmotivated" details. Such superfluous description lends a tactile reality to a scene, or in his words, an *effet de réel*; it denotes what really happened.[71] Egeria's strategy on Mount Nebo appears, initially, quite different. Rather than adding luxuriant detail, she takes away;[72] and instead of eliding her authorial control over the text, she draws attention to it by directly addressing her readers. Both strategies imply that the writer is, above all, a trustworthy witness who records visible reality. By drawing our attention so markedly to one object—the pillar of salt—and to her failure to see and record that object, Egeria strongly asserts her claim to being a reliable author, who has produced a truthful and comprehensive account.[73]

[69] "Nam michi [*sic*] credat volo affectio vestra, quantum tamen pervidere potui, filios Israhel sic ambulasse, ut quantum irent dextra, tantum reverterentur sinistra, quantum denuo in ante ibant, tantum denuo retro revertebantur" (*Itin. Eg.* 7.3 [trans. Gingras]). Wilkinson translates more freely: "So, as far as I can see, loving sisters, you must take it that the children of Israel zigzagged their way to the Red Sea, first right, then back left again, now forwards, and now back" (*Egeria's Travels*, 116).

[70] *Itin. Eg.* 17.2 (trans. Gingras, slightly altered to reflect the almost identical Latin phrasing: "nam mihi credat volo affectio vestra").

[71] Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language* (trans. Richard Howard; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989) 141–48. Reading Flaubert's description of Mme Aubain's room in "A Simple Heart," where "an old piano supported, under a barometer, a pyramidal heap of boxes and cartons," we find ourselves supposing that the author described the barometer simply because it existed, for there seems no other reason for its inclusion (ibid., at 141).

[72] The impression of comprehensiveness is similarly strengthened by the occasional acknowledgment of selectivity. She admits, in the midst of her account of her trip through the Sinai, that the list of sites is not complete, not only because she could no longer remember everything she was shown, but also because she was intentionally holding back information: "Though I must always give thanks to God for all things, I shall not speak about the many favors [non dicam in his tantis et talibus] which he deigned to confer upon me" (*Itin. Eg.* 5.12 [trans. Gingras]).

[73] Her direct address to her readers at the end of the travelogue portion of her texts betrays her sense of herself as an author: "As I send this letter to Your Charity and to you, reverend ladies, it is already my intention to go . . . to Asia. . . . If, after this, I am still living, I will either tell Your Charity in person [ipsa presens] . . . about whatever other places I shall have come to know, or certainly I will write you of it in letters [scriptis nuntiabo], if there is anything else I have in mind" (*Itin. Eg.* 23.10 [trans. Gingras]).

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Supplementation and erasure both augment the authority of a writer, but of the two, erasure is the more powerful strategy. By her willingness to contravene expectation, to register non-truth—even to disappoint her readers—Egeria firmly establishes the veracity of her own witness. She proves that she is an author who does not engage in pretense, who, as she herself claims, does not deceive (*fallere*) her readers; they can believe her. This authorial purpose is so imperative that Egeria is even willing to raise the agonizing doubt that the meaning of the land is neither stable nor patent, but subject to erasure and in need of supplementation.

In place of the pillar that had once been Lot's wife, Egeria was offered and in turn offers her readers a view of "the whole country of the Sodomites." This regional reinscription directs our attention back to the destruction of the Cities of the Plain and the question of why this biblical event prompted such vivid interest.

Temporal Borders

The pillar of salt that had once been a woman was essentially a marker of past judgment. Like Lot's wife herself, it looked back: back to Gen 19:26 and to primeval history. But it also looked forward to a future judgment: "Remember Lot's wife," Jesus warns his disciples in Luke 17:32, speaking of the last days. In order to appreciate Egeria's commitment to this sight, we too must remember not just the past but also the future.

Scholars of pilgrimage, myself included, have often stated quite unequivocally that the time celebrated in early Christian pilgrimage accounts is historical. Pilgrims, we read, desire to be in the place of revelation because they long to be in the time of revelation.[74] Certainly the words that Egeria uses to describe the pillar of salt, *memoria* and *titulus*, have a strongly historical cast.[75] Other early commentators stress their sense of the almost eerie historical preservation of the region. Tertullian notes that the country around the ruins of Sodom and Gomorrah "still smells of that conflagration."[76] And John Chrysostom's invitation to his congregation is even more striking: "If you want to, you can visit those places and see the land screaming aloud [τὴν γὴν βοῶσαν], so to speak, and revealing the traces of punishment, even after such a number of years, as though inflicted yesterday or the day before—so vivid are the signs of God's wrath."[77] Visitors would witness what Egeria presumably

[74] Robert L. Wilken, *The Land Called Holy* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1992) 120; Rehav Rubin, "Ideology and Landscape in Early Printed Maps of Jerusalem," in *Ideology and Landscape in Historical Perspective: Essays on the Meanings of Some Places in the Past* (ed. Alan R. H. Baker and Gideon Biger; Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 15–30 at 24–25; Blake Leyerle, "Landscape as Cartography in Early Christian Pilgrimage Narratives," *JAAR* 64 (1996) 119–43, at 131.

[75] One of the first meanings of *titulus*, according to the *OLD*, is "a commemorative tablet on which details of a person's career, etc., are inscribed."

[76] Tertullian, *Apol*. 40.7; see also *Passio Pionii* 4.

[77] John Chrysostom, *Hom. Gen*. 42.5 (trans. Hill). The region commands interest as a monument made by God. Compare his words on the destroyed Temple: "Even today, if you go into Jerusalem,

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also saw: that of the original five Cities of the Plain, only "something remains" of Zoar, but that the others had been reduced to "heaps of ruins, because they were burned to ashes."[78]

The fate suffered by these cities intensified their collective meaning as a dystopia. Like other classic dystopias, they were located in a distant and singularly inhospitable region, on the temporal edges of knowledge, and associated with the inversion of right order. They too functioned to comment upon current society and to project this vision into the future: to sound a warning.[79] Already in the third-century *Passion* of Pionius, the entire region points to the imminence of judgment:

> The judgment on the world is imminent; of this we are convinced for many reasons. Once on a journey I traveled all through Palestine, and crossing the Jordan River I saw a land that bears witness [μαρτυροῦσαν] even to this day of the divine anger that has afflicted it by reason of the sins committed by its inhabitants, who killed foreigners, drove them out, or did them violence [βιαζόμενοι]. I saw smoke rising even until now, and a land scorched by fire, deprived of all produce and water. I saw too, the Dead Sea, a body of water transformed and depleted beyond its natural state by the fear of God, unable to nurture any living thing, indeed anything thrust into it is expelled upwards by the water, and it cannot hold even a man's body within it. It refuses to receive man lest it ever again be punished because of man.[80]

The Cities of the Plain "must be left to lie in ashes forever," Jerome insists; for the fact that just one small city out of the five was spared, and that only one man and his daughters were saved proclaims the reality of differential merit as well as certain judgment.[81] By the seventh century, a guide for pilgrims located a portal to Hades, emitting smoke and a voice crying, "Woe to Sodom," just to the east of the pillar of

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you will see the bare foundation" (*Adv. Jud.* 5.11). See also Justin Martyr, *Apol.* 1.53.8–9.

[78] *Itin. Eg.* 12.6 (trans. Wilkinson). In Eusebius's *Onomasticon*, Jerome identifies Segor with "Bala and Zoara, one of the five cities of the Sodomites, which was saved from the fire by the prayers of Lot, and which is pointed out even now" (trans. Freeman-Grenville). Zoar is represented on the Madaba Map surrounded by palm trees. "The symbol is that of a medium-sized town with two red-roofed churches" (Herbert Donner, *The Mosaic Map of Madaba: An Introductory Guide* [Kampen: Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1992] 42). This mosaic, however, was created in the second half of the sixth century. See also the comments of Félix-Marie Abel, "Une croisière à la mer Morte III," *RB* 19 (1910) 92–112, 217–33, at 101.

[79] Rhiannon Evans, *Utopia Antiqua: Readings of the Golden Age and Decline at Rome* (London: Routledge, 2007) 6–7.

[80] *Passio Pionii* 4.17–20 (trans. Musurillo); Pierre Maraval, *Lieux Saints et pèlerinages d'Orient* (Paris: Cerf, 1985) 26. This martyr text is usually ascribed to the third century on the basis of the prominence of Polemon, the reference to the emperor's edict (3.2), and the explicit dating (23), but Candida R. Moss has recently called this dating into question, arguing that "the questioning, the imprisonment, the strong anti-Semitism, and elaborate discussion of satanic involvement seem to be out of place with the time of the Decian persecution" (*Other Christs: Imitating Jesus in Ancient Christian Ideologies of Martyrdom* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010] 195–96).

[81] Jerome, *Ep.* 46.7; *Jov.* 2.24.

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salt.[82] The ruins of the Pentapolis were thus, in the words of John Chrysostom, both "reminders of past wrath and forewarnings of future punishments."[83] As a condensed symbol of the region, the pillar of salt similarly looked both ways.

At the moment of her transformation, Lot's wife had already fled from Sodom, but her backward glance linked her fate with that of the citizens of the Plains. Her remains became accordingly an image of the judgment passed on the citizens of Sodom. The sins that provoked God's punishment aroused considerable patristic commentary. The author of the *Passion* of Pionius, as we have seen above, mentions the persecution and murder of foreigners; the sexual exploitation of strangers is conveyed somewhat indirectly by the verb "to do violence" [βιάζεσθαι]. John Chrysostom, to the contrary, begins with a clear acknowledgement of these specific sexual crimes. Because the men of Sodom "had overturned the laws of nature and had devised novel and illicit forms of intercourse," God "imposed a novel form of punishment, rendering sterile the womb of the earth . . . [as] a perpetual reminder to later generations."[84] But the preacher immediately extends his analysis, noting that wherever sexual vice is notably present, other sins are usually rampant: "the powerful oppressing the weak, the rich the poor."[85] The sins of Sodom were those of any great city.

One effect of this enlarged culpability was, apparently, an arousal of fellow feeling. Some members of Chrysostom's congregation objected to God's punishment of the Cities of the Plain on the grounds of its summary nature; surely, they urged, the citizens would have repented, had they "had the advantage of tolerance [μακροθυμίας]."[86] In answer, the preacher insists that the punishment visited upon Sodom was itself a sign of God's compassion. To appreciate this counterintuitive argument, we must turn to contemporary examples of civic correction. For, as Christopher Kelly has observed, early Christian images of God's judgment were modeled on contemporary Roman judicial practice.[87]

Rulers, when confronted with riot or other widespread urban lawlessness, typically stepped in swiftly to punish the instigators—ideally in as public and

[82] Epiphanius the Monk, *The Holy City and Holy Places*, 39. Herbert Donner dates the Jerusalem portion of this document to 638–692 C.E. ("Die Palästinabeschreibung des Epiphanius Monachus Hagiopolita," *ZDPV* 87 [1971] 45-92).

[83] ὀργῆς ὑπομνήματα ὄντα, τῆς μελλούσης κολάσεως προμηνύματα (John Chrysostom, *De perfecta caritate* 7). Josephus uses the unusual term "shadows" (σκιάς) to suggest that only the outlines of the cities remained (*J.W.* 4.8.4).

[84] *Hom. Gen.* 42.5 (trans. Hill).

[85] John Chrysostom, *Hom. Gen.* 42.3 (trans. Hill). "Are there not today as well a lot of people who break the same laws as they (i.e., the people of Sodom)?" (ibid., 42.5 [trans. Hill]). This interpretation may be influenced by Isa 1:7–17, where the contemporary sins of Jerusalem are elided with those of Sodom and Gomorrah. In the *Onomasticon*, Eusebius and Jerome both simply gloss "Sodoma" as "a city of sinful men which was burnt near the Dead Sea" (trans. Freeman-Grenville).

[86] John Chrysostom, *Hom. Gen.* 42.5 (trans. Hill).

[87] Christopher Kelly, *Ruling the Later Roman Empire* (Revealing Antiquity 15; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004) 232–45.

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spectacular way as possible—and then drew back, leaving the citizens in fear. This dread was productive in that it inspired amendment of behavior and avowals of renewed loyalty. In this climate of chastened and restored order, the emperor could then display magnanimity by staying his hand. As a political strategy, it secured not only law and order, but also a reputation for clemency, with a minimal deployment of force. Chrysostom understands divine vengeance in exactly this way and draws the parallel explicitly: "Even as legislators have overlooked punishments for the guilty though they be established by law, so too our Lord Jesus Christ by punishing one or two sinners sets down like an inscription on a bronze stele their punishments and uses their experiences as a warning to all."[88] Speaking of the punishment of Uzziah, he points out how it proclaimed the forbearance of God, because it was limited and public:

> Do you see the loving-kindness in God's retribution? He did not release a thunderbolt, he did not cause an earthquake, he did not set the sky in disarray; instead the leprosy broke out, and in no other place than his forehead, in order that he might bear the trophy of punishment so that it would be like an inscription on a column [ἐν στήλῃ γράμματα]. It was not for his sake, you see, that it happened, but for people afterwards: he was capable of inflicting a punishment that was deserved, but did not inflict it; instead, it stood like an edict [νόμος] on some lofty place proclaiming, "Do not do likewise in case you suffer a like punishment." He went forth as a living edict [νόμος ἔμψυχος], his forehead emitting a sound more strident than any trumpet, an inscription written on his forehead, an indelible inscription: it was not written in ink for someone to delete it; instead the leprosy came from nature.[89]

Like the leprosy of Uzziah, the physical ruins of Sodom spoke not only of the reality of judgment, but also of the mercy of God, who could have extended the punishment, but did not. The drama and the precision of this distant chastisement found perfect expression in the pillar of salt, which functioned "like an inscription on a column."

The indelible nature of these divine inscriptions was another aspect of God's mercy. Because they were permanently visible, all could see and profit from them. Only the devil, according to Chrysostom, would "wish or work to abolish the memory" of judgment and punishment.[90] By reminding everyone of past judicial action, Lot's wife evoked a productive fear of a future judgment that might occur at

[88] John Chrysostom, *Virginit*. 23; the translation is taken from *John Chrysostom: On Virginity; Against Remarriage* (trans. Sally Shore; New York: Edwin Mellen, 1983).

[89] *Comm*. *Isa*. 4.5; the translation is taken from *St*. *John Chrysostom: Old Testament Homilies* (trans. Robert C. Hill; 3 vols.; Brookline, Mass.: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2003); see also *Homélies sur Ozias* (ed. Jean Dumortier; SC 277; Paris: Cerf, 1981). The passage continues to describe Cain in similar terms as a "living edict" (νόμον ἔμψυχον) and a "walking monument" (στήλην περιερχομένον) (John Chrysostom, *Comm*. *Isa*. 4.6; see also idem, *Hom*. *Gen*. 19.5; *Adv*. *Jud*. 8.2).

[90] John Chrysostom, *Exp*. *Ps*. 11/12.3 (PG 55:146); see also idem, *Comm*. *Job* 19.12.

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any time. And it is precisely in this sense that Luke, alone of the synoptic authors, uses the image in his version of the apocalypse:

> Just as it was in the days of Noah, so too it will be in the days of the Son of Man. They were eating and drinking, and marrying and being given in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed all of them. Likewise just as it was in the days of Lot: they were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building, but on the day that Lot left Sodom, it rained fire and sulfur from heaven and destroyed all of them—it will be like that on the day that the Son of Man is revealed. On that day, anyone on the housetop who has belongings in the house must not come down to take them away; and likewise anyone in the field must not turn back. Remember Lot's wife.[91]

By focusing on the pillar of salt, Christians sharpened their awareness of transcendent reality, and more especially of their own participation within that drama.

A crucial moment in this participation was the rite of baptism—itself a border ritual—and it is in this context, as we have noted, that many patristic writers refer to Lot's wife.[92] These passages emphasize the reality and proximity of judgment. In the words of Gregory Nazianzen, to live in the midst of public affairs is to live among the Sodomites and to be stained by them. He exhorts his listeners to follow the example of Lot:

> Snatch your soul away from the world; flee from Sodom; flee from the burning; travel on without turning back, lest you be fixed as a stone of salt. Save yourself in the mountain lest you perish along with the city.[93]

In this reading, the mountain, which Lot entered "as the sun rose," stands for Christ, as we find already in Origen;[94] and the backward glance of Lot's wife becomes assimilated with the person who, having put a hand to the plow, looks back (Luke 9:62). By training their eyes on Lot's wife, preachers hoped to help the baptized avoid backsliding and "becoming frozen into a pillar of salt, a really immortal pillar [στήλην ὄντως ἀθάνατον]."[95] In the sweep of salvation

[91] Luke 17:26–32 (NRSV).

[92] If, as Power argues, the site of Lot's wife stood to the north of the Dead Sea, it would have been in striking proximity to the site memorialized as the place of Jesus' baptism ("Site of the Pentapolis," 23–62).

[93] *Or. Bas*. 40.19.

[94] "Since you have left Sodom, do not turn toward Sodom. Since you have left evil and sin, do not return to it, nor remain in the surrounding countryside . . . never turn to what is behind nor remain in the surrounding countryside nor be in any other place than in the mountain. For there is the only place to be saved. And the mountain is Lord Jesus" (Origen, *Fr. Jer*. 13.3; the translation is taken from *Origen: Homilies on Jeremiah* [trans. John Clark Smith; FC 97; Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1998]; see also *Homélies XII–XX et Homélies latines* [vol. 2 of *Homélies sur Jérémie*; ed. Pierre Nautin; SC 238; Paris: Cerf, 1977]).

[95] Gregory Nazianzen, *Or. Bas*. 16.14 (PG 35:953).

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history, therefore, Lot's wife marked a crucial ritual and temporal border. Her remains represented in durable form not only everything that the Christian had already escaped through baptism, but also all that they hoped to avoid at the Last Judgment.[96] As such, she was an image of mercy as well as of justice.

We cannot know whether Egeria understood Lot's wife in this way, but this temporal context would go a long way to explaining the sight's importance within early Christianity and thus its assured position on the pilgrimage route. It does seem certain, however, that Egeria's dismay stems in large part from a sense of shock at the disappearance of a sight that she had assumed was durable for all time. For it is precisely to this issue that the Bishop of Zoar responds, first by insisting that the pillar still remains, although "now completely submerged by water," and then by indicating the place of her *titulus*, which we might now wish to translate in its judicial sense, as "charge" or "writ of condemnation."[97] By locating the place of her judgment, he restores what is most essential to the sight. Egeria, in turn, directs her readers to an even more stable location where the pillar of salt remains permanently inscribed, namely "the place still read in scripture" (locus etiam in Scripturis legitur). We would do well to appreciate how this "place" lies not only in the familiar chapter from Genesis, but also in the New Testament gospel of Luke.

Thus to the biographical, geographical, and narratological borders on which Lot's wife stood, we must add a temporal one. By pointing back to the beginnings of God's history with Israel and forward to the Christian judgment, the pillar of salt stood as a condensed symbol of revelation history. By instantiating the gap between those judicial moments, it issued a durable and general warning. Within this broad temporal sweep, the sight acquired, moreover, a specific ritual cast. Fixed forever in aborted flight from Sodom, Lot's wife crystallized the destruction that Christians had escaped through baptism and hoped to avoid again at the Last Judgment. On this border, she spoke simultaneously of the severity and the mercy of God.

Conclusion

Egeria's disappointment on Mount Nebo at not being able to see Lot's wife seems finally quite understandable. Associated in patristic exegesis with renunciation of the world, either in baptism or through asceticism, her memorial would have had particular meaning for a group of religious women. Thus Egeria seizes this moment to speak directly to her female readers back home. Her admission of failure has further authorial benefits, as it cements

[96] Gregory associates the avenging fire of Sodom with that "prepared for the Devil and his angels" (*Or. Bas*. 40.36).

[97] Albert Blaise notes this later pejorative sense of *titulus*, citing Tertullian *Apol*. 1.4, 49.2 and *Paen*. 7.8 (*A Handbook of Christian Latin: Style, Morphology, and Syntax* [Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1994]).

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the veracity of her autopsy and the credibility of her narrative. In addition to these biographical and narrative functions, Lot's wife had political importance. As a topographical marker, the pillar of salt identified the southeastern edge of the Holy Land. Its absence marred Egeria's pleasurable sense of dominion. The bishop's consequent ability to reinscribe the sight, despite the instability of the terrain, buttressed his claim—and that of all holy men—to ownership of the land. Finally, as a memorial of past and future judgment, Lot's wife encapsulated the temporal claims of Christianity, in which history was always in the service of the future. It was the position of Lot's wife on all these borders that provoked Egeria's sharp disappointment; and from our perspective, we can see that it was over-determined.

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