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# THE LAST PRIEST OF CAESAREA

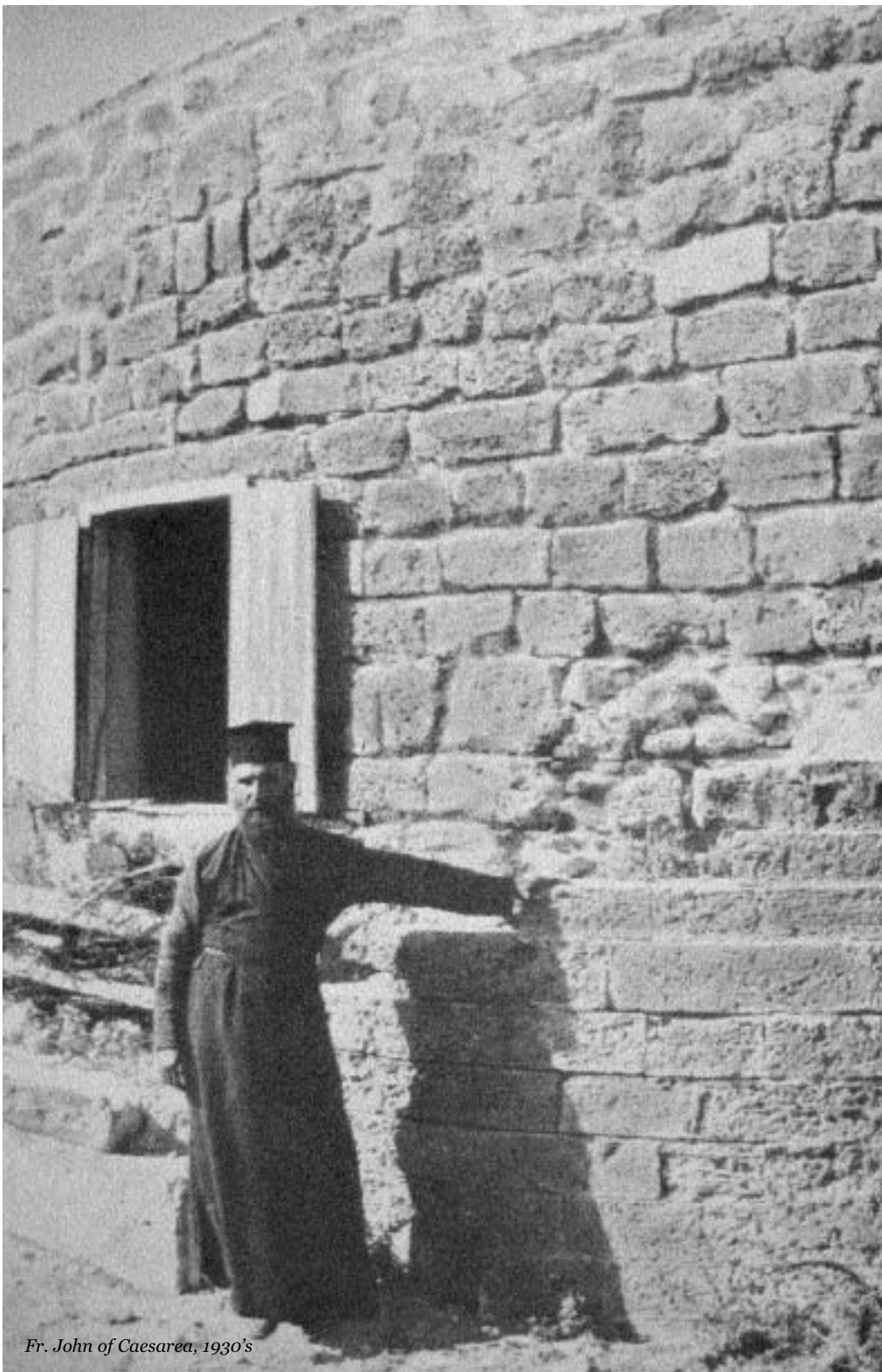
In the early 1930s with Palestine under the British Mandate, H.V. Morton, an English journalist, traveled through the Holy Land gathering material for a book on Saint Paul. In Caesarea he found the ruins of Herod's great city, enjoyed Arab hospitality, and had a poignant meeting with the Greek priest-caretaker of St. Paul's prison.

I went down to the station in the freshness of the morning. The train started off on its long daily journey across the Plain of Sharon and the Sinai Desert to Kantara East, where it links up with the Cairo Express. I could have cast a stone into the Mediterranean, which sparkled at the right-hand windows; to the left were hills and a sandy road on which files of burdened camels plodded towards Haifa.

We passed the massive ruins of the Castle of Athlit, the *Castrum Perigrinorum* of the Middle Ages, whose vast honey-coloured walls and bastions rise out at sea, the blue waves thundering perpetually against them, flinging up walls of spray.

Within an hour or so the train drew into the little station of Benyamina. The lines lay on sand. Sand stretched away to the east, and rose inland to slight hills. There were a few wooden sheds round the station, and posts to which sitting camels were tied. As I jumped down on the track, I saw that I was the only passenger for Benyamina. A fair-haired young Englishman in the uniform of a police sergeant came up, tapping his blue puttees with a riding-switch. In the background stood a constable holding two horses, one of them a lovely white Arab mare.

"Good morning," said the sergeant. "We've got a hot day for it. It will take us a good hour to get to Caesarea." We walked towards the horses. In the background, subjected to the stony scrutiny of a group of Arabs, was an odd-looking vehicle drawn by two mules. It was a frail, four-wheeled buggy of the kind made familiar to us in old-fashioned films. It had a canvas hood to shield its passengers from the sun, and a narrow box-seat on which a huge Polish Jew in his shirt-sleeves sat holding the reins.



Fr. John of Caesarea, 1930's

The sergeant cast an apprehensive glance at me and coughed.

"I'm sorry," he began, and stopped.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Well, I thought you would be an old man," he said, "so I got a sand-cart for you. We could have done it much quicker on horseback."

I climbed into the sand-cart, which creaked in every joint. The Polish Jew shouted at the mules, and lurching violently across the railway lines, we ploughed on over the sand. The sergeant and this constable mounted their horses and trotted up, one on either side. I asked the sergeant if the constable were an Arab or a Jew.

"He's a Jew," he said. "A good fellow, too."

"Why is a police escort necessary for Caesarea?"

"Well, it's a bit out of the way, you know. It's really perfectly safe. The few Arabs who live there are grand people and never give any trouble, but you're the first person to visit Caesarea for over three years and I thought I'd like to go with you."

Miniature mountain ranges of fine gold sand fringe the Palestinian coast from the frontier at Rafa almost to Haifa, a distance of about a hundred miles. It has drifted up from Egypt and the Sinai Desert. Sir Flinders Petrie once told me that he found evidence, when digging in these dunes, that in remote times the district was a Riviera where cities surrounded by palm trees stood on the shores of the sea. Irrigation and palm groves, which stop the drift of the sand, would bring this desert to life once again.

My memory of that journey to Caesarea is of dazzling sunlight, of cactus hedges, of camels, of Bedouin watering enormous flocks of sheep at desert wells, and of the creaking and swaying of the cart as it lurched, sometimes up to the front axles, in the soft sand.

Caesarea is about five miles from the railhead. It still retains its old name, and the Arabs have preserved the pronunciation, Kaisereyah.

The first sign that we were approaching Caesarea was a blue sweep of the Mediterranean Sea within a mile of us, and something like a road, which now developed between walls of brown stone. The landscape was strewn for miles with countless roughly shaped, weathered sandstones, looking like petrified sponges. I realised that these were the remains of the buildings of ancient Caesarea. As we continued towards a haphazard Arab village that lay ahead, dozens of small children ran screaming in front of us as if they had seen the devil. We came at length to a squalid collection of box-like

Arab houses and barns, a mosque or two, and a mass of ruined walls huddled together on a half-moon of sand on the edge of the sea.

"Here we are," said the sergeant. "This is Caesarea."

While we were arranging for the stabling of the horses and the mules, the few hundred inhabitants of Caesarea gathered round, the veiled women standing on roofs or peeping from half-open doors. The leading family of Caesarea was represented by three slim young Arabs, indistinguishable from each other save for the fact that one was dressed in a shirt and trousers, another in shirt and riding-breeches, with bare feet, and the third in a striped native *galabiyeh*. After the formal handshaking, the three brothers said that they were proud to welcome a stranger to Caesarea and they invited us to eat with them at any hour suitable to ourselves. We said that nothing would charm us more than to accept the hospitality of a family so noted for its kindness. We then shook hands all over again.

I turned to explore Caesarea. There is little left of the Roman city except numbers of fallen stones. The once magnificent harbour is now a rocky bay into which a ruined pier of solid masonry projects for some distance. Walking along the foreshore, we came to the ruins of a Roman theatre cut in the rock. It is a small one, probably an odeon, and nothing remains except the curve of the tiers of seats. Roman pillars are built into many of the Arab houses in the village.

The Palestine Government maintains a guardian of antiquities in Caesarea. We discovered him, a delightful old Arab in a black gown, rocking himself to and fro as he pored over a copy of the Koran, spectacles on the end of his nose. At the sight of us he rose and slowly strapped on an enamelled armlet; thus officially attired, he unlocked the door of a shed in which we saw a pathetic assembly of battered marble heads and a few shattered inscriptions.

For miles in every direction the country-side is strewn with stones and chips of marble. Complete pillars are often dug up in the fields, but no systematic excavation has ever been carried out. It is impossible to gain any idea of the ancient city.

Josephus tells us that Herod the Great built Caesarea as the great port of his kingdom. He called it Caesarea in honour of Augustus Caesar. Herod was a master of the art of dedication. Even writers of Georgian days, who are usually believed to have developed the art of flattery to its limit in the hope of favours to come, were children compared with Herod. Under his rule Palestine became covered with new towns, each one carefully named in hon-



*Van de Velde, Ruins near Caesarea (1892).*

our of some member of the Imperial House. Herod spent twelve years in building Caesarea, and it became the best port and most up-to-date city in Palestine. By sinking enormous stones in twenty fathoms of water, he made a breakwater two hundred feet wide. The harbour was magnificent, and every road led down to it. All the main roads were intersected by broad, parallel avenues, and a system of underground subways connected various quarters of the city with the harbour.

He placed some of his finest buildings along the harbour front. On a platform facing the sea, there was a superb temple of marble so high that it could be seen a great way off by approaching ships, and in this he placed a statue of Roma and another of Augustus. The most luxurious of all the buildings was the Palace of Herod.

After Herod's death, Caesarea was made the political capital under Roman administration. The Herodian palace was turned into the Roman Government House, in which a succession of procurators, including Pontius Pilate, kept state.

In the course of our walk we left the village and explored the country at the back of it, where a few scattered farms stand among orange groves.

"Are there no Christians here now?" I asked the sergeant.

"There is Father John, a Greek priest," he replied.

At that moment a horseman topped a rise of ground before us. He sat in an Arab saddle and his bridle was a single strand of rope. He wore a pair of striped trousers which had once, in some inconceivable past, belonged to a morning coat. His grey shirt was open at the neck and his feet in Arab slippers were thrust into bucket stirrups. He carried a shot-gun slung across his back. But the most remarkable feature about him was his face, which was as dark as an Arab's. It was a lean, brown face, with the straight nose seen in classical sculpture. His beard grew away from the lips and stood out crisply. His hair was looped up at the back in a gigantic knot that would, if unbound, have fallen below his waist. This impressive person came riding towards us, an odd mixture of brigand and saint.

"Who on earth is he?" I asked the sergeant.

"This," he replied, "is Father John."

The priest apologized for his appearance. It was unfortunate, he said, that I should have caught him at such a moment, but he thought there was a hare in the corn and had been out in the hope that he could offer a stew of hare to the Bishop of Caesarea, who was coming to stay with him.



Ruins near Caesarea.



*Ruins of Crusader building near Caesarea.*

“The Bishop of Caesarea?” I said. “I had no idea there was such a see.”

“Ah,” he said, “alas, alas, it is an empty title! Look around you. Only the stones remain to us. But there were great bishops here in olden times. Eusebius was Bishop of Caesarea.”

He gave a hitch to his shot-gun.

“The present Bishop lives in Jerusalem and I, Father John, am merely a watch-dog – a caretaker.”

“But what do you watch, Father?” I asked.

“I watch a piece of land which the Greek Orthodox Church has possessed since the time of the Byzantine Empire. It is all that is left of our great possessions. All...all...was once Christian,” and he swept his arm to include the stone-scattered hills, “but now...well, you can see for yourself!”

“And your Bishop?” I asked.

“Comes to see me when he feels in need of a change,” he replied. “I am sorry I could not have shot that hare. I must try again to-night.”

“Are there no Christians in Caesarea to-day, not even one family?” I asked.

“There are four families,” he replied, “But they are Latins and Maronites. You, sir, seem interested in such things?”

I told him that I was writing a book about St. Paul. At the sound of St. Paul’s name, he slipped a leg over the withers of his horse and jumped to the ground, coming towards me with outstretched arms as if about to embrace me.

“Thrice welcome to Caesarea!” he cried. “You must come and see my church, which is dedicated to St. Paul.”

He held my hands in his. I was as eager to see his church as he was to show it to me. I told him we should come to his house as soon as we had lunched with our Arab friends. Beaming all over his handsome face, Father John leapt into the saddle, and with many a backward wave of the hand, disappeared over the stony hill.

“He’s a great character,” smiled the sergeant. “And he’s a fine shot, too...”

The three brothers were waiting for us in a ceremonial attitude outside a wooden gate set in a mud wall. We shook hands. They opened the gate, exposing to view a little courtyard and a whitewashed house approached by a flight of outside stairs. Mounting them, we were shown into a cool room in which a table was set for a meal. With the exquisite courtesy of their race, they had obviously sacked the town for knives, forks, and spoons, in their determination to provide a European meal. Water was brought and poured

over our hands. One of the brothers entered, bearing a tray containing glasses of mulberry syrup. Then coffee was produced. This was followed by cigarettes. Every time I moved to do anything, to change my position or to find a box of matches, the three brothers darted to my side in an excess of troubled consideration. Half an hour passed. Three-quarters...one hour. Still there was no luncheon! We had some more mulberry syrup. At the end of the hour savoury smells of varied pungency began to prance and curvet about the room. There was an encouraging sound of sizzling. A look of polite anxiety would cross the face of a brother, and he would quietly disappear, to return almost immediately, looking gratified. Nothing, evidently, had gone wrong.

Suddenly the door was silently opened and two bare female arms were seen holding a steaming bowl. All three brothers rushed to the door, and the soup was placed on the table. It was chicken broth, and excellent. No amount of persuasion would induce the brothers to sit down and eat with us. They insisted on serving us. We said how excellent the soup was, but they lifted their hands in simulated disgust, and said it was very bad, that the meal was mere makeshift, and that had they known of our visit in time, a meal more suitable for such distinguished persons would have been prepared.

Again the two provoking bare arms were seen, grasping a gigantic platter heaped with veal, tomatoes, and rice. This also was excellent. We said so. The brothers again lifted their hands and said it was a worthless snack. We were so hungry, and ate so heavily of this, that we hoped it was the end. But no. Once more the door silently opened, and the two female arms were seen for a brief second holding a round dish containing sufficient eggs, minced meat and fried onions to feed twenty starving giants. We protested humorously that it was too much. It was a mere trifle, cried our lavish hosts, piling great mounds on our plates, and bidding us set to with a will and have done with our polite speeches.

“But this is a feast, a banquet!” I said rather heavily.

“It is nothing! It is mere pot-luck!” I was told; and one of the brothers darted over and playfully put two more eggs on my plate.

They sat, irradiated with courtesy, administering devastating hospitality. I began to breathe with some difficulty. I thought that I should never again be able to eat veal, rice, minced meat, eggs or onions. Then I became aware that something awful had happened. The door was open again! The two mysterious arms were there. I could hardly bring myself to look. With a sense of impending doom, I saw that the *pièce de résistance* had arrived in



the form of grilled chickens' legs and livers. The slaughter in the poultry-house must have been terrible. There were at least twenty legs. Fortunately, the Jewish policeman had the appetite of Gargantua. He ate – goodness knows how – three chickens' legs and a quantity of liver. In a silence that had now become sinister, I saw the door softly open, but it was only mulberry syrup and coffee. Luncheon, happily, was over.

Our hosts smoked with us and told me as much as they knew about ancient Caesarea. I was anxious to find out if any memory of the great city lingers today in the songs and stories of the modern inhabitants. I heard a curious and interesting thing. The ruins of the little theatre, which I had seen near the seashore, are called in Arabic “the theatre of the girls,” and the ruins of the hippodrome on Father John's land, which I had not yet seen, are called “the place of the horses.” Are these names a memory of the Greek plays and chariot races held so long ago?

We said good-bye to the three brothers, in whom I shall always think that the traditional hospitality of the Arab race has attained its climax, and made our way slowly and heavily towards the dwelling of Father John. He greeted us on the doorstep; he was dressed in a long gown and wore the stove-pipe hat of a Greek priest.

“You *must* have something to eat!” he said earnestly.

“No, no, no, we must not!” we cried, as we entered his cool kitchen and sat down. But Father John, a Greek from Cyprus, had his traditions too. He produced coffee and saucers of melon jam.

One of the most difficult things, in those parts of the world where the inhabitants are so accustomed to hunger that generosity consists in stuffing a guest until he can hardly move, is to continue to praise the food. It is etiquette to praise, yet to do so is also to run the danger of a second helping. I was, therefore, grateful to Father John's cat, which at that moment caused a diversion by leaping into a meat-safe that had been left open, and attempting to get away with something that was probably reserved for the Bishop.

“And now come and see the Church of St. Paul,” said Father John.

He led the way into his garden, where gold-brown stones of the Byzantine period rise among fruit trees and cabbages. The building is the apse of a cathedral that once stood here. The original stones are still in position for about four courses, but the building has been patched in modern times and a roof put over it.



Caesarean-Byzantine burial inscriptions.

“This was the Cathedral of St. Paul in Caesarea,” said Father John, “and it was built, as I will show you, above the prison in which he was confined. But first let us see the church.”

He hitched up his cassock and, drawing a key out of his trousers pocket, he unlocked a frail wooden door that he had made to keep chickens and sheep out of the church. We entered a dark little stone cell whose enormous original stones looked strange in so small a building. A wooden table covered with an ordinary table-cloth served as an altar. Two brass candlesticks and a wooden crucifix stood on it. There were several ikons hanging on the stone wall, and lying on ledges was a strange assortment of Roman marbles and Byzantine inscriptions which Father John had, from time to time, dug up on his land.

I have never been in such a pathetically poor little church in my life. It is also the only Greek church I have ever seen without an *ikonstasis*. Every Sunday Father John holds a service there alone. No one ever comes, because there are no parishioners. To this feeble flicker has Christianity sunk in the city of St. Paul, of Origen and of Eusebius.

He opened shutters covered with cobwebs to let in more light, and as he pointed out beauties where none were visible to the eye, I realised that I had been unjust to him. Seeing him on horseback with his gun, I had thought him more interested in shooting a hare or planting a row of beans than in spiritual things: but now, in this pitiful little chapel in which he moved with the ease and confidence of long familiarity, he seemed to grow taller and the dignity of his sacred office made him another man.



“I am a poor priest,” he cried. “I have nothing. But if I had something, I should give it all to save from foul desecration the vault – the holy vault – that lies below this church.”

I could say nothing in reply. I was so surprised to see the change in him. His eyes blazed. He had suddenly become the church militant.

“Below the church,” he continued, “is the prison of St. Paul. You will see for yourself. It is a stable for donkeys and mules. Is that desecration? I say it is desecration, most terrible. It was sold in 1925 to Jews who farm some land here, and they use it so. Let us go and see!”

He strode angrily away, pointing over the waste ground to the stumps and pillars which marked the site of the cathedral of St. Paul. He led us to a long, beautifully built vault in which a farm wagon was standing. The vault is built of huge stones which looked to me of Byzantine date, or perhaps even earlier. It had evidently once formed part of the crypt of the ruined cathedral. The tradition of the Greek Church is that it marks the prison of St. Paul. I was so impressed by the intensity of Father John’s emotion that I promised to write on his behalf to the Palestine Government and ask that a competent antiquary should be sent out to inspect the building. This has been done, and I have heard from the government that, pending the purchase of the vault by the Greek Orthodox Church, steps have been taken “to induce the present tenant to remove his animals from the vault and to preserve it in a seemly condition.”

It took Father John a long time to regain his cheerfulness. He strode ahead in unusual silence. Pushing aside a dense clump of oleanders, he said:

“Here is the hippodrome of Caesarea.”

With a start of amazement, I looked over the ghost of a great arena marked in green grass. In the middle, overthrown and lying on its side, was a massive obelisk of rose-red granite, one of the three *metoe* which marked the starting-point of the chariot races. Like many such amphitheatres, notably the great stadium at Olympia, the race-course of Caesarea was cut out of the side of the hill and was not, apparently, covered with marble. That is probably the reason why it has been so admirably preserved: there was nothing worth stealing in it. There can be no doubt that this is the amphitheatre constructed by Herod the Great. “On the south quarter behind the port,” says Josephus, “he built an amphitheatre capable of holding a vast number of men, and conveniently situated for a prospect to the sea.”

The amphitheatre once seated over twenty thousand spectators, and if the brushwood were cleared away, it would be possible to hold horse-races there to-morrow. Wild lemon trees grow on the banks where the audience once sat, and on the shady side of the course, where the royal box was placed, stands an enormous fig tree, as if deliberately marking the spot from which Herod, and, afterwards, the Procurators of Rome, looked down in splendour at the games...

I said good-bye to Father John. The Polish Jew whipped up the mules and we set off at a brisk pace, for it was growing dark. On the way back to Haifa in the night train, my thoughts kept returning to that lonely priest who once a week lights a taper to the glory of God among the ruins of Caesarea. †

From H.V. Morton, *In the Steps of St. Paul*, Methuen and Co. Ltd., April, 1937.