

Photographs of Jerusalem, 1903

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In 1903, just before the dramatic changes of the last century engulfed Palestine, Salt Lake City photographer Charles Ellis Johnson (1857–1926) found himself in Jerusalem. While not the first Latter-day Saint to visit the Old City of Jerusalem, Johnson was the earliest Mormon professional photographer to capture views of the city and its inhabitants and thus freeze a unique, peaceful moment in time.¹

Because of religious prohibitions against making graven images, there were few Jewish or Muslim photographers in the country when Johnson visited the region. He was therefore among a select group of Europeans and North Americans to have preserved on paper and glass the people and places in the Holy Land before the Ottoman Empire lost its hold on Jerusalem in 1917.²

Johnson's vast glass-plate negative collection documents the street life of Jerusalem, including poor people, shopkeepers, religious pilgrims, and a host of other people who lived and worked in the Holy City. Additionally, Johnson captures in a series of stunning photographs the impressive Ottoman Turkish walls and gates that define the Old City of Jerusalem even today.

Historical Context of the Photographs

Johnson began his photographic career in Salt Lake City in time to document the completion of the Salt Lake Temple in the early 1890s. For the next twenty-five years, he was one of the most productive Mormon photographers in Utah.³ In 1897 a mysterious woman from Palestine burst on the scene in Salt Lake City, delivering a series of spellbinding lectures on Palestine and the life of Christ. Madame Lydia Mary Olive Von Finkelstein Mamreov Mountford captured even the attention of Church President Wilford Woodruff: “I took . . . my family to the Theater to listen to Another Lecture of Mrs Lydia Mumford on Jerrusalem [sic]. Her lectures are the Most interesting of Any I Attended on the Holy Land and upon all that was spoken by the savior.”⁴

In that same year, Mountford and Johnson met, beginning an association that lasted until her death in 1917. She returned to Utah in 1903 to enlist Johnson's help in preparing a photographic exhibit on the Holy Land for the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair. With contract in hand, Johnson traveled to Palestine with his patron, producing some two thousand images of

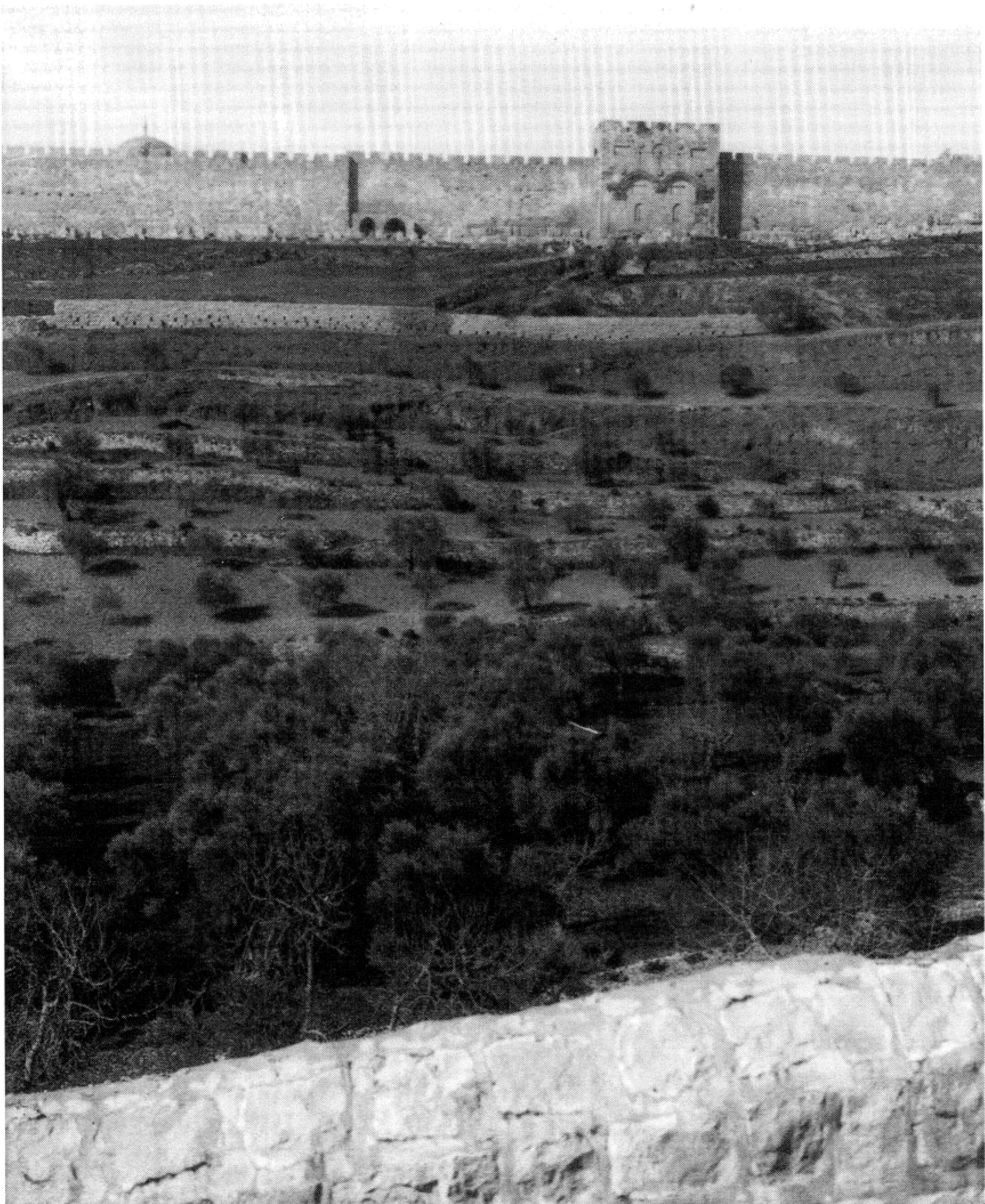


FIG. 1. Detail from a stereo view taken in 1903 from the Wadi Joz (Kidron Valley) east of the Old City of Jerusalem. This detail highlights the eastern retaining wall of the Haram al-Sharif (Noble Sanctuary) and the Golden Gate. The Golden Gate is composed of two separate and distinct gates, visible here as two arches—Bab al-Tawba (Gate of Repentance) and Bab al-Rahma (Gate of Mercy)—and has been bricked up for nearly half a millennium. The gate remains sealed today and has acquired a profound Messianic significance even among some Muslims, who hold that Jesus will reenter the city by this gate at the beginning of the Day of Judgment. The olive groves below the gate on the western valley have been overtaken in the past century by the expansion of Muslim cemeteries. Courtesy Charles Ellis Johnson Collection, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University; hereafter cited as Johnson Collection.

Jerusalem and its environs in a “variety of formats including roll-film Kodaks and 6½-by-8½-inch field cameras, which were portable enough and fast enough to shoot hand-held without a tripod.”⁵ The glass-plate negative collection consists of plates measuring 7" x 5" (see figs. 1, 2) and 8½" x 6½" (see figs. 3, 4).

Some of the most impressive views in Johnson’s vast collection are of the Old City’s walls and gates. Left in ruins since 1219, the walls and gates were reconstructed between 1536 and 1540 by Sultan Suleiman bin Selim the Lawgiver (1494–1566). These Ottoman Turkish walls and gates were constructed on the medieval foundations, themselves erected on the ruins of walls dating from the Roman period. Archaeologists have discovered that the Ottoman Turkish builders made “use of whatever building materials came to hand—from the hewn stone of Herod’s day to the ordinary rocks and stones used in earlier periods.”⁶ Additionally, Suleiman rebuilt the ancient gates and apparently resealed the famous “Golden Gate” at this time (see figs. 1, 2). One historian notes, “Architecturally, the restoration of the walls [and gates] of Jerusalem by Suleiman the Magnificent is considered a major feat, since there are not many places where the Turks built fortifications of this kind and took pains to embellish them with all manner of adornments.”⁷

Most of the walls stand between thirty-nine and forty-six feet high and are more than five thousand yards long, with eight gates. When Johnson arrived in Jerusalem in 1903, the walls and gates remained much as they had been for nearly four centuries. While today a tourist sees the same gates and walls, the whole context of Jerusalem has dramatically shifted amidst the complexities of modernity and the upheavals that have washed across the region like a political and social deluge.

Perhaps more important than the architecture of 1903 Jerusalem are its people, and Johnson demonstrates his artistic skill as well as any other photographer of his day by recording hundreds of images of daily life in Jerusalem at the turn of the century (see figs. 5–9). His timing in this regard was also crucial: he photographed the faces of Jerusalem at a time when its demographics were undergoing dramatic change. Although Jerusalem had remained almost entirely Muslim for centuries, fifty years before Johnson arrived the Jewish presence began to increase dramatically. In 1903 the majority were Muslims, but there was a significant presence of Christians and a much smaller group of European and Sephardic Jews in the region. At a time when the population of all of Palestine was about five hundred thousand, Jerusalem had grown from a little more than fifteen thousand in 1844 to nearly seventy-four thousand just a few years after Johnson walked the streets of the Old City.⁸



FIG. 2. Detail from a stereo view taken in 1903, looking south from a Muslim cemetery northeast of the Old City. Stereo views were formed of two slightly different images placed side by side. Johnson's stereo camera had two lenses side by side so that the two exposures were made simultaneously. When seen through a stereoscope, a stereo view provides a sense of three dimensions, similar to the way our two eyes give us depth perception.

This detail highlights the Golden Gate (double gate to the left), the Dome of the Rock (the large domed building in the center), and a major section of the eastern wall of the Haram al-Sharif. The smaller dome of the al-Aqsa Mosque can be seen between the Golden Gate and the Dome of the Rock. The al-Aqsa Mosque has been the major regional mosque in Palestine for thirteen hundred years. It and the Dome of the Rock are part of the Haram al-Sharif, which is considered the third most holy site in Islam. Courtesy Johnson Collection.

Written sources substantiate Johnson's view of the daily life of the local people at the turn of the century. While certainly, as with all photographers, Johnson selected his subjects carefully and therefore in a sense edited his experiences in the Holy Land, he nevertheless provided enough images to reveal the texture of life there in 1903. As Johnson's photographs show, the vast majority of people living in Palestine at the time were poor. In the towns and cities, open sewers ran through unpaved, garbage-strewn streets. In the villages, women still drew water from wells as they had in biblical times. Bread was baked at home in outdoor ovens from flour milled by hand. The gates of the walled cities, including Jerusalem, were locked from sundown to sunrise for protection.

While Palestine had been a remote and almost forgotten region of the Ottoman Empire during most of the nineteenth century, it stood on the verge of modernization. A rail line had been completed from the port city of Jaffa on the Mediterranean to Jerusalem just a few years earlier in 1892, providing a much-needed stimulus to the local economy. It was during this crucial transitional period in Jerusalem's history that Johnson documented the daily life of the people and the places of Old Jerusalem.

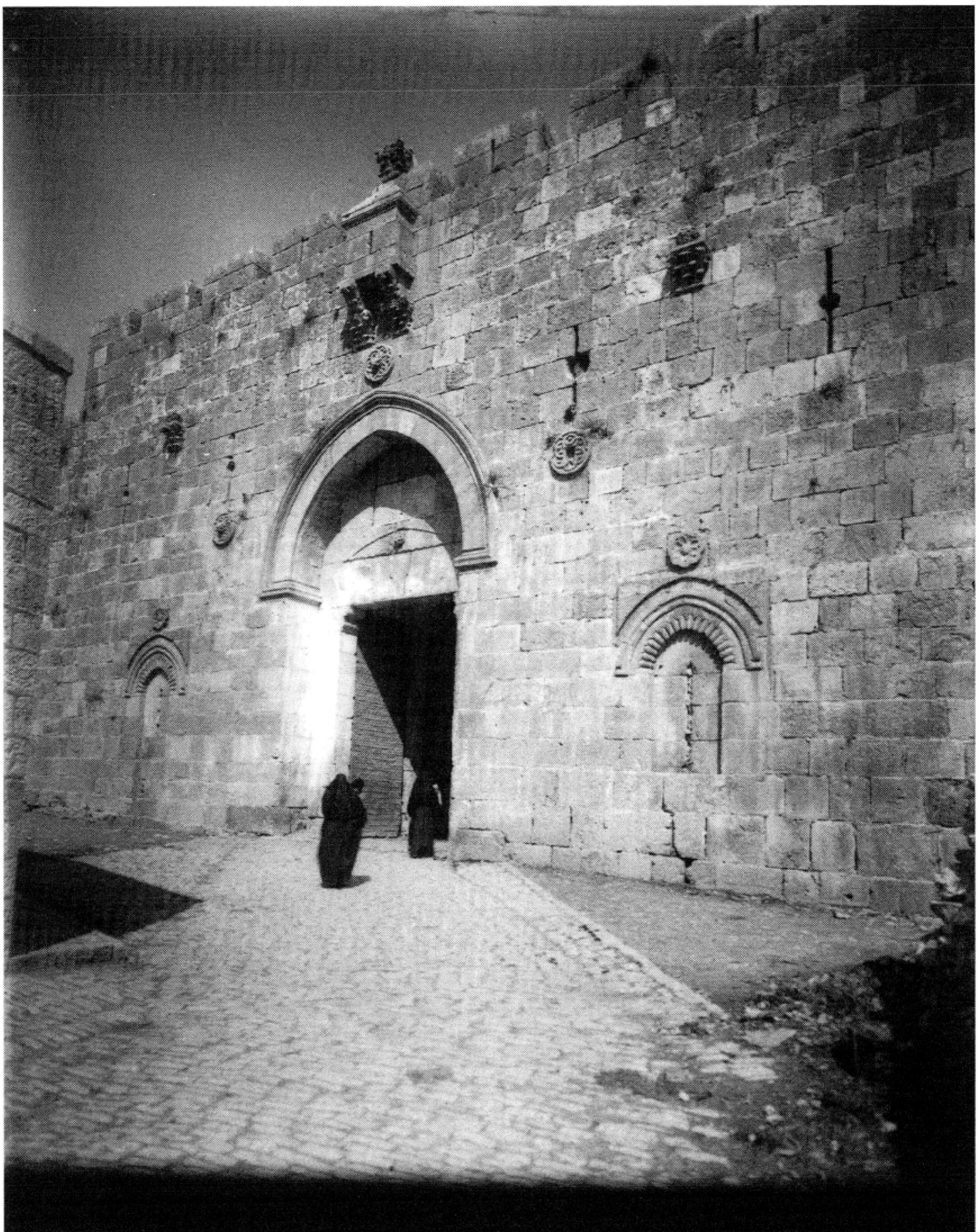


FIG. 3. A view taken in 1903 of Bab al-Nabi Daoud (Gate of the Prophet David), commonly called Bab Daoud (David's Gate) but also known to many tourists today as Zion Gate. Like the Jaffa Gate and the Lion Gate, this gate has an L-shaped corridor just inside the gate, formed by a brick wall that runs parallel to the main wall and opens to the south. This design forced invaders to make ninety-degree turns, which slowed them as they went through the gate. The L-shaped walls around the gate also prevented invaders from using battering rams because they could not get a ram past the inner wall. Defenders were in position to shoot arrows through slits in the gate. For those who have visited Jerusalem recently, this photograph preserves a view of the gate before modern armed conflict left it riddled with marks of shells dating from 1948. Courtesy Johnson Collection.

Provenance of the Photographs

Johnson left Utah for San Jose, California, in 1917 and took with him his important negative collection, including his views of Palestine. Following his death on February 21, 1926, his nephew William J. Fox transferred the bulk of Johnson's glass-plate collection to his home in southern California. There they survived the ravages of time, several moves, and at least one fire. Following Fox's death, his brother, David Fox, obtained the collection and in 1975 donated it to Brigham Young University for permanent preservation. Here they remain, basically unknown.⁹

Conclusion

While the organizers of the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair eventually reneged on the contract and Charles Ellis Johnson's works were never published, Johnson preserved a slice of time when the Ottomans still ruled Jerusalem (1517–1917), a time when the Eternal City was a peaceful dwelling place for Muslims, Christians, and Jews. These photographs provide a unique perspective of the city just prior to its witnessing monumental changes in the political and social landscape of the region. Johnson seems to have intuitively known what Thomas G. Appleton noted some thirty years earlier: "As historic landscape, Palestine is full of those suggestive sites, those eloquent battlefields and homes of kings and prophets, which do not need the help of mere beauty to give them interest."¹⁰

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1. A number of Church members, leaders, and missionaries, including Orson Hyde (1841), George A. Smith, and Eliza R. Snow (1873), visited Palestine before Johnson arrived in 1903. See David B. Galbraith, D. Kelly Ogden, and Andrew C. Skinner, *Jerusalem, the Eternal City* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996), 332–47.

2. See Yeshayahu Nir, *The Bible and the Image: The History of Photography in the Holy Land, 1839–1899* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985).

3. See Nelson B. Wadsworth, *Set in Stone, Fixed in Glass: The Mormons, the West, and Their Photographers* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996), 1–11.

4. Wilford Woodruff, *Wilford Woodruff's Journal, 1833–1898, Typescript*, ed. Scott G. Kenney, 7 vols. (Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1985), 446, February 8, 1897.

5. Wadsworth, *Set in Stone*, 305.

6. Dan Bahat, *Carta's Historical Atlas of Jerusalem* (Jerusalem: Carta, 1986), 64.

7. Bahat, *Carta's Historical Atlas*, 66.

8. See Nachum Tim Gidal, *Jerusalem: In 3000 Years* (Köln, Germany: Könemann, 1995), 42.

9. Wadsworth provided a small sampling of Johnson's Holy Land work in *Set in Stone*, 270–317. Later, the *BYU Studies* staff provided two examples from the collection in "The Holy Land: A Premodern Photo Tour," *BYU Studies* 37, no. 4 (1997–98): 85–86.

10. Thomas G. Appleton, *Syrian Sunshine* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1877), 165–66.



FIG. 4. A view taken in 1903 southwest of the Old City looking north. This view highlights a section of the Western Wall, including the Jaffa Gate and the "Citadel" with its mosque's minaret towering over the wall. This minaret is one of the best-known symbols of the city. Johnson wrote on the original glass-plate negative, "First View of Jerusalem," probably an indication that this was the first photograph he took of the Old City. The Jaffa Gate was built in 1538 and faces onto the road to Hebron. The Arabs, therefore, call it Bab al-Khalil, "Gate of the Friend" (referring to Abraham, friend of God, who was buried in Hebron). It received its popular name, Jaffa Gate, during the nineteenth century because it opens onto the road to the coastal city of Jaffa. The road pictured here is still used today for travel southward toward Bethlehem. Courtesy Johnson Collection.

(Photographs continue on following pages.)



FIG. 5. Portrait of an elderly gentleman and a young boy taken in 1903. The damage seen on the edges is a result of improper storage of the original glass-plate negative before Brigham Young University acquired the collection. Exposure to water caused the emulsion of the glass-plate negative to flake. Nevertheless, this highly artistic photograph shows Johnson at his best in making timeless portraits. Courtesy Johnson Collection.



FIG. 6. Detail from a stereo view taken in 1903. Here Johnson captures a slice of life showing a young Arab boy having his hair cut by a man (possibly his father) while another young boy watches. Courtesy Johnson Collection.



FIG. 7. Street scene taken in 1903 highlighting the religious, cultural, and economic environment of Jerusalem at the turn of the century. Note in particular the women seated on the ground selling wood from their baskets. At that time, wood was still used in Jerusalem for cooking and heating. Courtesy Johnson Collection.

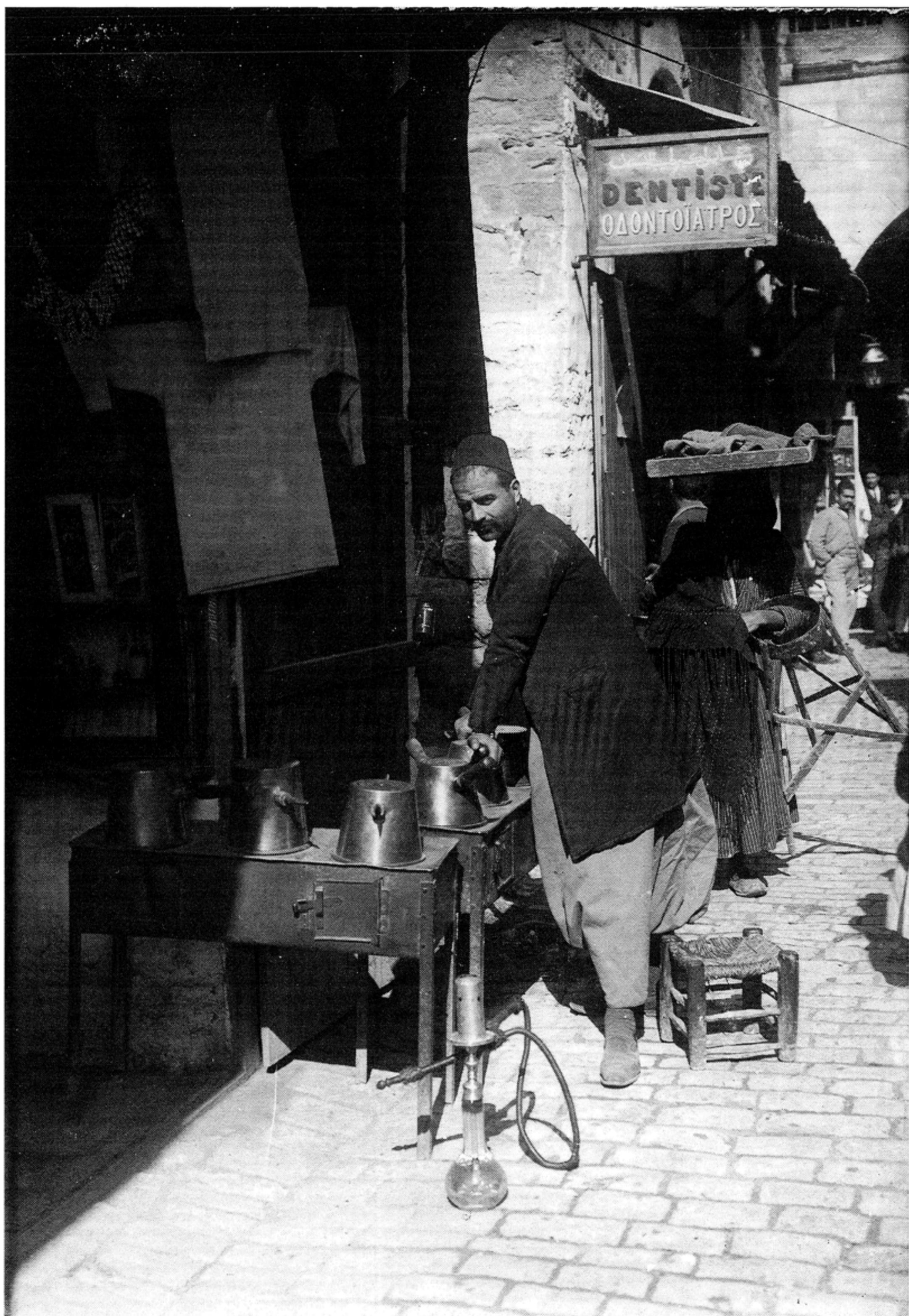


FIG. 8. Detail from a stereo view taken in 1903. Somewhere in the Old City Johnson captures a fez maker standing in front of his shop. Details in this image show a variety of elements of the typical life of a shopkeeper and those who sold their goods along the byways of the Old City. The fez maker has his hands on one of the metal molds used to form a fez. Courtesy Johnson Collection. A fez is a cone-shaped, red hat (the fez maker himself has one on) commonly worn by men in the Ottoman Empire before 1923.

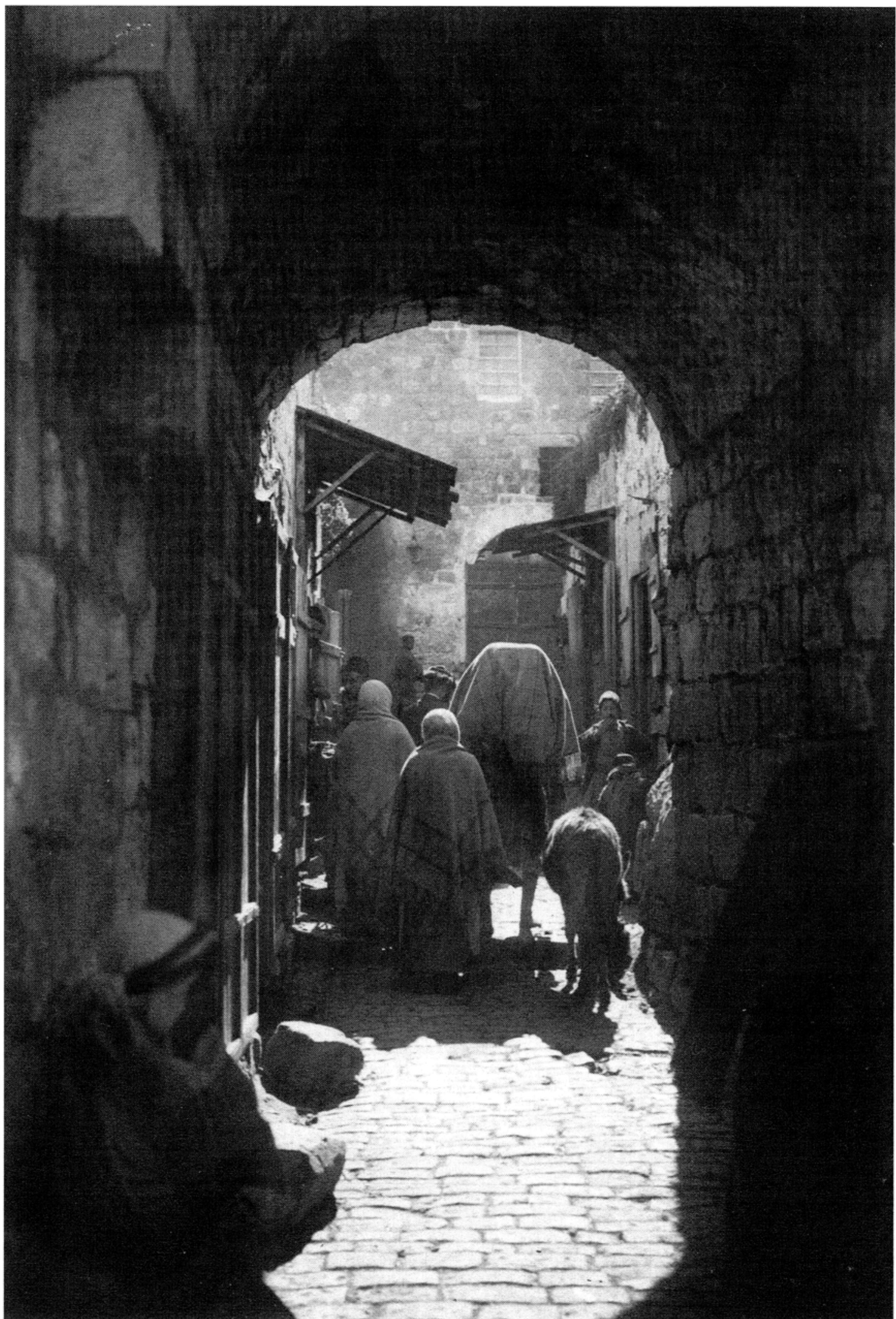


FIG. 9. Stereo view of street life in the Old City taken in 1903. This composition, created by the play of light and shadow and by using the archway as a frame, shows Johnson's skill not just as a photographic technician and photo journalist but also as a photographic artist. Courtesy Johnson Collection.