



Jerusalem For Sale: Souvenirs, Tourists and the Old City

Elizabeth Price

Six hundred years ago, a German friar named Felix came on pilgrimage to Jerusalem. After a lengthy tour of the holy places, he and his fellow pilgrims returned home with bags stuffed full of religious souvenirs. Among the *objets de piété* were a crucifix in paper, parchment with pictures of the Mount of Olives, girdles of thread with the measurements of the Holy Sepulchre and wooden models of the local churches.¹

If a German tourist of today were to retrace Friar Felix's steps, his bags would likely

¹ H.F.M. Prescott, *Friar Felix at Large: A Fifteenth-century Pilgrimage to the Holy Land* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950).

contain souvenirs of a different sort. In his collection, there might be Jerusalem candles, lengths of Indian cloth and a T-shirt stamped with a reference to Israel. In contrast to the friar's *objets*, none of the tourist's souvenirs would actually be made in Jerusalem or represent its traditions.

In the centuries that have passed since the friar's pilgrimage, Jerusalem has fallen and risen numerous times, passing through the hands of multiple occupiers. But the conquering force that has wrought some of the most permanent changes in the Old City of Jerusalem did not arrive triumphantly in army jeeps but descended in chattering hordes from tour buses. In the last hundred years, it was tourism that altered the face of the Old City beyond recognition.

Where once pilgrims bought religious handicrafts made by local craftsmen, the Old City shops are now filled with cheap mass-produced goods made in Israel or India. The items reflect the tourists' varying perceptions of Jerusalem: an exotic Middle Eastern bazaar, the heart of Jewish nationalism or Jesus' city frozen in time. Whatever the assumptions tourists make, the city they see is often a distorted doppelganger, which has little connection to the lives or culture of its inhabitants. With the power of the purchase behind them and few governmental initiatives to support a revitalization of the Old City, the tourists unwittingly shape old Jerusalem into what they want to see. As a result, what was once a market city, whose diverse trades included catering to seasonal pilgrims, has become an isolated tourist site, its economy beholden to its visitors and its cultural image dictated by the souvenirs that they like to buy.

Pilgrims and Merchants

Throughout the centuries, foreigners have come to Jerusalem, drawn to the many holy sites within its walls. Pilgrimage was the most common reason for the journey, for, until recently, travel was lengthy and often fatal and was usually undertaken only for the most urgent reasons. Most English-language accounts of travel to Jerusalem in the past are about Christian pilgrimage and are full of portrayals of the pilgrims' experiences in the city.² In these narratives, we find descriptions of how, in addition to the desired holy experience, the pilgrims wanted something to take back with them as a reminder of what they had seen or a symbol to show to others of their travel.

This desire for souvenirs was obviously a well-recognized danger to pious concentration, for Friar Felix described how the pilgrims were warned not to "sit and waste time trafficking with the... merchants" who followed them around the churches.³ The friar went on, with some dismay, to describe those who succumbed to the merchants' offers:

I saw there some nobly born and illustrious pilgrims, who on their own estates would have thought bargaining with tradesmen... to be a thing unbecoming to them... yet here... they never ceased making bargains, and buying precious stuffs and jewels.⁴

² My research was limited to English-language documents, which concentrated mostly on Christian pilgrimage and European tourism. Since I had little access to information about Muslim or Jewish pilgrimage, this article is largely about Christian and European tourists.

³ Prescott, "Friar Felix at Large," p. 136.

⁴ Ibid, p. 142.

Items on sale seem to have been largely religious in nature and local in manufacture and included jewelry, cloth, wooden objects and icons. Proceeding to the 19th century, one sees that the same types of *objet de piété* were on offer. The churches were still "crowded with vendors of rosaries, relics, pictures and the endless little knickknacks of olive wood made for the tourists and pilgrims," according to Bertha Spafford Vester, a foreign resident of Jerusalem.⁵

The production of the religious souvenirs was a major industry for residents of Jerusalem and the surrounding areas. Christian pilgrimage was a seasonal activity, peaking around the Easter celebrations. In the last few hundred years, the Christian pilgrims were mostly poor members of the Orthodox communities in Russia, Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean area. Nonetheless, the vast numbers in which the Christian pilgrims came, in the 19th century in particular, were enough to create full-time occupation for the craftsmen of Jerusalem and the surrounding areas. According to Spafford Vester,

Candle-dippers worked the year round to have a supply equal to the demands of the thousands of... pilgrims who attended the annual celebration of the Holy Fire. Then there were the makers of ikons [sic] and mother-of-pearl and olive wood trinkets. Shroud makers made a good living stenciling black skulls and crossbones on white muslin to be worn by the Russian pilgrims

*when they were dipped in the Jordan River.*⁶

Historically, however, Jerusalem was not dependent on pilgrims and foreign visitors. From Friar Felix's descriptions, it is apparent that the wealthier pilgrims purchased luxury secular goods produced for local consumption. One young Gascon knight went home with six crates of goods, including "lengths of red damask, of cloth of gold...; purses of silk and gold thread; gloves of white deerskin and birds of Cyprus to perfume the house."⁷ Furthermore, the layout of Jerusalem's still-surviving market has no obviously defined space for souvenirs, indicating that it was a marginal part of the city's economic life.

Local Markets and Tourism Deluxe

The major markets were geared for local customers, as is apparent in Friar Felix's description of the bazaars: "Each trade kept to itself; shoemakers here, tailors who sold 'ready-mades' there, jewel merchants, merchants who sold silk or cotton or sugar, all were to be found on their own separate streets."⁸ Street names in the Old City still indicate the city areas that were used for the separate mercantile activities. On the road leading from Damascus Gate was a market that specialized in olive oil; the street is still known as *Suq Khan al-Zeit* (the Oil Market). In the middle of the city were various *suqs*: *Suq al-Dabbaghah* (Tanner's Market), *Suq al-Lahamin* (Butcher's Market), *Suq al-Attarin* (the Spice Market), *Suq al-Khawajat*

⁵ Bertha Spafford Vester, *Our Jerusalem: An American family in the Holy City 1881-1949* (Jerusalem: Ariel Publishing House, 1988), p. 92.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁷ Prescott, "Friar Felix at Large," p. 225.

⁸ Prescott, "Friar Felix at Large," p. 180.

(Goldsmith's Market) and *Suq al-Qattanin* (the Cotton Merchants Market). These names alone show the diversity of traditional trades that served the city residents and visitors from nearby towns and villages and give an insight into the vital economy the Old City once had.

Foreign visits to Jerusalem increased during the late 19th century, as the European powers' growing influence over the Ottomans ensured their citizens' safety in Ottoman territory. Western Christian interest in the Holy Land inspired new waves of Protestant pilgrims, although never in the number and emotional intensity of the Orthodox pilgrims. As travel became easier and more reliable, secular curiosity brought others, caught up in the Victorian frenzy for exploration. Many of these Western visitors were from the wealthier classes, for the nascent tourism industry with its luxurious modes of transport was beyond the means of most. In 1886, when American friends came to visit Spafford Vester's family, they sojourned in the style typical of the well-off Western traveler:

There was no good hotel in Jerusalem, so they camped on the Mount of Olives. Such camps were magnificent, the equipment sumptuous, and the service excellent. In those days of leisurely travel, the camp provided the ideal way, and they were used by Thomas Cook and Son and all tourist contractors.⁹

However, the main economic focus of the city was still its mainly secular merchandise produced by its craftsmen or imported by its traders. The poorer pilgrims continued to buy

the religious handicrafts while the wealthier pilgrims and tourists bought the high quality goods normally sold to local residents. Yasser Barakat, the owner of an antique store near the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, said that his father, who sold textiles and carpets imported from Syria or Iraq, attracted mostly customers from Jerusalem or other nearby Palestinian cities. Occasionally, foreigners would also visit the store. In the mid-20th century, he remembered, rich Gulf pilgrims would come once a year and buy vast quantities of his father's goods:

I remember when I was young; I used to play on the rugs in my father's shop [while they shopped]. We used to spread open six, seven or eight carpets. What we opened, they wanted. Ten carpets...meters and meters of textiles [sic]...At that time, we used to make in one day the amount of sales that I would ever make in a life time.¹⁰

Farewell to Russians: Introduction of New Technologies

It was only in the 20th century that irreversible changes to the city's economy began occurring. In 1917, the Russian Revolution brought an end to the annual pilgrimage of thousands of Russian pilgrims. This dealt a blow to the craftsmen who made the souvenirs popular with the Russians, such as muslin shrouds and fragrant soaps decorated with religious pictures. Soon after, these items disappeared from the market.

Another threat to the traditional handicrafts came later in the century when the craftsmen

⁹Spafford Vester, "Our Jerusalem," p. 160.

¹⁰Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes from Jerusalem merchants are from original interviews.

adopted new technologies in an effort to remain competitive. In the 1960s, for instance, electrically-manned machines began to be used in olivewood carving factories. Although the machines cut down production time and manpower, producing 12 pieces in the time it would take to hand-carve one piece, the industrialization sparked a decline in the quality of local handicrafts.¹¹ In the last few decades, craftsmen who continue to hand-make their goods have become increasingly rare, resulting in a market filled with uniform and inferior versions of Jerusalem's traditional handicrafts.

As the century wore on, residents of the cramped and insalubrious walled city began moving out to the modern neighborhoods of New Jerusalem. Commercial centers emerged to rival the Old City's markets, which began to lose their specialized focus. Economic life in the Old City started to crumble.

After 1948: Political Instability and Jordanian Limits

Tourists still came, but never in great numbers. Following the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the political instability began that has marked Jerusalem's last one hundred years, and only the adventurous or pious braved the journey. With each governmental transition, tourism and pilgrimage went through a brief depression, returning to their normal levels after a few years. Stephan Karakashian, an 82-year old Armenian potter on the Via Dolorosa, recalled the effect of the 1948 war:

"In 1948, there was a big change. The Old City was cut off from all Israelis. It took several years for tourists to start coming again. Between 1948-52, no one came."

The number and type of tourists remained the same through to the 1960s. Under the Jordanians, tourism plateaued and souvenir stores remained scarce. The Jordanian authorities strictly controlled the licenses for souvenir stores, only allowing a handful of shops to operate. Yasser Barakat recalled, "Under the Jordanians, there were limitations on the opening of souvenir shops. They only allowed seven or eight shops for Christians. Because not many tourists came, souvenirs were not common." The stores were clustered around the holy sites, with a group of Christian stores at the entrances to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre or near Jaffa Gate. These store locations indicate that tourist-oriented souvenirs remained mostly religious in nature.

The Western visitors were still either wealthy tourists or pilgrims. One elderly Old City merchant said that up until the late 1950s, it was only the rich who came as tourists, but in the 1960s, tourists from the middle class began arriving. For a Westerner, the journey to Jerusalem was exotic and therefore challenging, involving travel to a divided city in an Arab country. Under the Jordanians, Arab visitors also came from the surrounding Arab countries and the Gulf, many spending heavily in the bazaars. Khaled al-Salfiti, a souvenir merchant on Khan al-Zeit Street, remembered, "Before 1967, more Arabs came here. There were Lebanese, Jordanians and Iraqis. Arabs, like the Kuwaitis and Saudis, used to spend more money than the foreigners."

¹¹ Interview with Zakaria Albert Zakaria. *Smithsonian Folklife Festival: Jerusalem Project (Al Quds)*, (1993), pp.128-129.

1967: A Second Invasion of Israeli Shoppers

In 1967, life in the Old City of Jerusalem changed overnight. Many of the merchants with whom I talked described it as a second invasion, but of Israeli shoppers rather than soldiers. Karakashian said,

It was like waves. Every day, Israelis would flood in. On Saturdays, you couldn't move around. They wouldn't just come from Tel Aviv but also from the surrounding towns and kibbutzes to come to the Old City and buy goods here.

For the Israelis, the newly conquered markets of the Old City held invaluable pickings. Under the Jordanians, the Palestinian merchants had access to relatively cheap, basic foreign imports that the Israeli consumers had never even seen. According to Ya'oub Halwili, an antique storeowner on the Via Dolorosa, "For the first week, the Israelis only bought cleaning liquids and materials."

Israeli shoppers were also fascinated by the city's traditional handicrafts. "After the city fell and they reopened the shops, in one day, my father sold 93 carpets, because at that time, the Israelis didn't have access to anything," said Barakat. He believes that, between 1967 and 1973, Israeli collectors purchased most of the remaining hand-made items from the market. "A lot of Palestinian embroidery, textiles and jewelry went to the Israelis. They call the embroidery 'Holy Land embroidery'," he said, adding, "Palestinian jewelry is now priceless because it is rare."

With the industrialization of the handicraft

industry, fewer artisans continued to produce hand-made products. As a result, the goods purchased so avidly by Israelis after 1967 were not being replaced. Declining prices of the goods and the rising costs of production made it difficult for all but a few craftsmen to remain competitive. The lower end of the trades never recovered from the loss of the Russian pilgrims, who had provided a predictable market. The political upheavals also had an effect on the secular and more expensive crafts, such as carpets, textiles and embroidery. Materials used in the crafts traditionally came from other Arab countries, whose trade routes were cut off after 1967. In addition, many of the artisans were made refugees in the wars of 1948 and 1967 and were no longer available for work.

Others chose to leave in the decades after the Israeli occupation, such as large numbers of the city's historic Armenian community. A section of a 1980s guidebook on Jerusalem describes the contemporary Armenian-dominated jewelry trade: "Most of the jewelry shops in the bazaars of the Old City are owned by Armenians... Only on Muristan Road do Armenian artisans still practice their ancient craft..."¹² The once thriving Armenian industry is as quiet as Muristan Road, where shop after shop stands shuttered.

The Israelis were not the first to recognize the value of these crafts, for under British and Jordanian rule, wealthy foreigners bought large amounts of high quality indigenous crafts. Several times a year, Halwili travels to European flea markets to buy Palestinian antiques for his shop. He showed me a 100-year old depiction of the Crucifixion carved

¹² Sarah Kaminker, *Footloose in Jerusalem* (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University, 1982).

beautifully from mother-of-pearl that he had bought at a Swiss flea market for a surprisingly low price. He said that it would be impossible to find a new piece of similar quality nowadays, adding, "The artisans are gone now. A talented artist needs 10 days to hand-carve a piece like this. They can't rely on the tourists to pay a sufficient price."

The Souveniring of Jerusalem

Along with the Israelis came the tourists. In the five years following the 1967 War, over three million people visited Israel, with almost all of them visiting Jerusalem.¹³ As the tourists rushed in, merchants accommodated them, turning their stores into souvenir shops. Halwili said that whole streets turned away from their traditional local trades to the more profitable tourist business:

As far as I can remember, the whole of the Old City of Jerusalem was built for the necessities of the locals. Shops that you see now were not like that before. After the occupation in 1967, slowly people started to change. You know, groceries turned into souvenir stores. Tailors turned into souvenir stores. On the upper Via Dolorosa, there were eight or nine restaurants for locals. All these businesses turned to souvenirs because a lot of tourists came.

The weakening of the traditional markets by the new commercial centers outside the Old City had prepared the ground for this

wholesale change of trade. In 1970, nearly 80% of the Old City trade was still retail, while souvenir stores made up only 10%.¹⁴ However, retail merchants were no longer bringing in the kind of income their fathers did, and, in tourism they felt like they had found new hope.

As Halwili pointed out, "People thought of changing their business into tourism because of better income." Elias Mannes, who has a candle-making workshop on the Christian Quarter Road, now one of the biggest souvenir areas in the Old City, remembers the road as a center for clothing and shoe stores. He said, "When I opened in 1952, there weren't that many souvenir stores... because there weren't that many tourists. Here on Christian Quarter Road, there was a clothing and shoe market. Slowly, after the Jordanians left in 1967, tourists started coming and things started changing."

Stores flourished in areas flooded with tourists. The Christian holy sites were still a popular destination, so all the access roads became prime souvenir zones, including the full length of the Via Dolorosa, Khan al-Zeit Street, the Christian Quarter Road and King David Street. The new influx of Jewish tourists was answered by stores along al Wad Street, King David Street and Chain Street, all of which lead to the Western Wall.

The change in tourist destination was significant. Where formerly the main reasons for tourism were the Christian and Muslim sites, the new status of Jerusalem under the Israelis provided a new attraction to a new group of visitors. Following 1967, Jews

¹³ Erik Cohen, *The Touristic Image of Israel - An Analysis of Guidebooks (Working Paper no. 21)* (Israel: Center for Urban and Regional Studies, Tel Aviv University, 1974), p. 6.

¹⁴ Ministry of the Interior, *City of Jerusalem: Bazaars and Commercial Streets* (Jerusalem: Government of Israel, 1970).

formed the majority of tourists to Israel. In 1970, about 60% of all tourists visiting Israel were Jews, and 40% were non-Jews. Nearly 40% of all tourists were Americans.

The assimilation of Jerusalem into the Israeli national identity gave the Old City an entirely new symbolism in the eyes of many tourists. For the Jews, the Old City represented the historical heart of the Jewish national and religious identity. For many Christians, particularly from the Protestant churches, the 1967 Israeli victory was another step towards the fulfillment of the messianic prophecy.

As a result, a new layer of meaning was added to the Old City's identity. The previous occupations of Jerusalem over the last few centuries, had not greatly interfered with the city's cultural lineage, allowing a palimpsest of historical identities to build up. However, after the Israeli capture of Jerusalem, the Old City's identity became a battleground. On the level of souvenirs, the tourists won.

Symbolic Souvenirs and Imported Traditions

Over the decades following 1967, the type of souvenirs sold became a mirror to the city's identity. The newly opened stores were free to sell what they chose. With no traditional links to souvenir types or specific craftsmen, they sold what the tourists wanted. The preferred souvenirs were no longer mainly religious. According to Jamal al-Syuri, a merchant on Al Wad Street, in the 1970s and early 1980s, tourists bought mainly ethnic goods, such as Bedouin crafts and embroidery. Mannes said, "Before 1967, people only wanted the traditional small candles we make for church offerings. Now

they want to buy candles with colors and scent. So, in the 1970s, I started selling Israeli-made 'Jerusalem candles' and my own colored candles."

Since traditional goods were increasingly rare, merchants started making reproductions that they labeled as indigenous. One merchant told me,

We made "traditional" pieces out of certain things. The pieces you see sold in the market, like gold Bedouin items...were made to look Bedouin. It has nothing to do with tradition. It is better to say things are made here. They buy things from India, cut them into pieces and remake them into ethnic-looking jewelry.

In the mid-1980s, tourists began buying the more Jewish-oriented souvenirs that are still common today - menorahs, Star of David pendants, kippa and t-shirts emblazoned with Hebrew writing. The tourists who bought these items were often Christians, particularly amongst the large numbers of Americans. Halwili said, "Americans like... anything that has a tie with the Bible. They buy because of religion, for Americans think biblically."

During the 1970s and 1980s, the markets in the Old City became more and more dependent on tourism, as the number of tourists remained high. With business thriving, they continued to offer the most popular Jewish and ethnic items. They sold at low prices to attract the bargain holiday tourist, who was an increasingly frequent tourist type. To sustain these low prices, the merchants started importing cheap goods from other countries, such as India or even Israel, designed to meet the tourist taste.

Souvenirs began to take on a universal vagueness, generally fitting in either the ethnic category or the Jewish category. The traditional religious souvenirs continued to be sold, but they were now made with machines to keep them cost-effective. As a result, Halwili said, "Jerusalem always had a rich market, but now it's cheap. It has gone from quality market to cheap stuff, possibly because of the [decreased] quality of tourists."

Shuttered Shops and Government Neglect

In the late 1980s, the political situation took a turn for the worse with the outbreak of the first Intifada. Tourist numbers dropped dramatically and have stayed lower than the previous decades ever since. As business dried up, many store owners returned to retail, which was still suffering from external competition and was not as profitable as the souvenir trade. Furthermore, despite a general drift back to the local market, the city would never regain its traditional mercantile atmosphere. Where once specialized markets filled the city according to historical hierarchies, now shops either sell what is most profitable to sell or remain shut. Entire rows of shops are permanently shuttered, victims of the retail hemorrhage to non-Old City markets or of the plummeting tourist trade.

Many of the merchants interviewed are angry at what they consider the failure of the Israeli government to support them in any way. For some, the disproportionate land taxes imposed on them has shut down their factories or threatens their businesses, making it unprofitable to produce their own goods or keep open their stores. A Smithsonian study conducted in the early 1990s, concludes that

the decline in the traditional crafts could have been slowed or stopped if the Israeli government had provided an economic, social and legal framework that protected the craftsmen, thereby preserving part of the city's unique cultural heritage.¹⁵

Others point to the general neglect of the Palestinian areas of the Old City and the municipality's failure to treat their quarters in a similar manner to the Jewish areas of Jerusalem. One merchant in the Muslim Quarter said, "The sewer cover outside my store has been broken for a week. I called the municipality several times and it's still broken. If I were in West Jerusalem, it would be fixed by now."

All merchants interviewed express frustration at the perceived disreputable image of the Old City among tourists. They recognize that the Palestinian areas are often dirty and crowded and that there is a crime problem, but they believe that the Jerusalem Municipality does nothing to try to improve the situation. Salfiti argued, "The municipality doesn't take care of the city. Streets are broken and full of tractors, dirt and garbage. So the impression is not good for tourists. On the Jewish side, everything is clean. If you are a foreign tourist, you are used to clean streets. Do you want to come and see garbage?" Halwili believes that the municipality could make the Old City safer, if it wanted. "Under the Jordanians ... everything was carefully controlled. They were strict. It is different with the Israelis. Despite of what they say about a united Jerusalem, there is a difference between the

¹⁵ Vera Tamari, *Made in Jerusalem: The Crafts of Jerusalem's Old City* (Smithsonian Folklife Festival: Jerusalem Project-Al Quds, 1993), p. 51.

two sides. They allow pickpockets in the Old City, for instance," he said.

Israeli Guides and Tourist Tensions

The merchants believe that the Israeli tour guides, who are almost entirely Jewish, manipulate the city's off-putting reputation. Salfiti said, "Jewish guides don't encourage them to come to our area. They give them an idea that we are not a safe area. The tour companies tell tourists not to walk in the Old City because there are thieves." Al-Syuri spoke of his belief that the tour guides only allow their groups to shop where the guides get commission. He said, "Only the big shops benefit from the tourists. The guides really influence them because they get a commission. They stop the buses right outside the shops and lock the door as the tourists buy the goods. The tourists are really gullible. If the tour guide says 'I will take you to a better shop,' they believe him."

Another major problem is the suspicion that they feel many tourists have towards them as Palestinian merchants, which they feel contrasts greatly with the tourist attitudes towards Jewish merchants. Al-Syuri believes that tourists have heard that they must bargain with the Palestinian merchants, saying, "American Jews come here with the belief that they are supporting the Israeli nation. Therefore, they don't mind paying any price in West Jerusalem. But when they come to the Old City, they don't trust us and bargain hard. If I say \$10, they say \$3." Other merchants say that many tourists will hide their money when getting money out for a purchase.

If souvenirs are the material memories brought back from travels, then what the

tourists visiting Jerusalem in the last few decades will remember has little connection to the indigenous culture of the Old City. Apart from the olivewood and mother-of-pearl carvings, religious candles and painted pottery, few items on sale in the souvenir stores have a traditional connection to the Old City. The souvenirs are either imported or re-designed to look local, and the scarcity of indigenous crafts means that a genuine item usually costs more than the average tourist would wish to pay.

According to the merchants, nowadays the tourists who do come already have a prejudice against them, perceiving them as devious or dangerous. This latent hostility combined with the poor economic situation creates a tension between frustrated merchants and uneasy tourists, with either side rarely having the genuine contact that would allow the tourist to develop a true picture of the merchant. For tourists, the Old City has been reduced to a series of holy sites with a stop at a souvenir store, filled with cheap mementos that are incongruous to their surroundings. For the merchants, particularly in recent months, their working lives have revolved endless games of cards or backgammon, broken up by scattered bouts of persuading wary tourists to buy something. As a merchant on the Christian Quarter Road pointed out to me, a few days before Easter, "If you had come to talk to me at the same time last year, I would not have had time to talk to you." During the half-hour I sat in his shop, one woman entered. She left without buying anything.

Elizabeth Price is a freelance writer and researcher based in Ramallah.