

BOOK REVIEW

Are You Coming with a Bulldozer to Silwan?

Palestinian Guides to Jerusalem and Its Environs

Review by Penny Johnson

Wujood: The Grassroots Guide to Jerusalem. 433 pp. Grassroots Al-Quds, 2019. \$40.00 paper. Digital version available, see online <http://www.grassrootsalquds.net/campaigns-projects/wujood-grassroots-guide-jerusalem-0>

Pilgrimage, Sciences and Sufism: Islamic Art in the West Bank and Gaza. 253 pp. Museum with No Frontiers and the Palestinian Authority, 2004. \$24.90 paper; \$8.72 Kindle.

Abstract

A review of two Palestinian guides to Jerusalem and its environs, as well as sites in the West Bank, Gaza and historic Palestine: *Wujood: The Grassroots Guide to Jerusalem* (2019) and *Pilgrimage, Sciences and Sufism: Islamic Art in the West Bank and Gaza* (2004). The review explores the fate of Palestinian guides to Jerusalem amid the well-financed marketing campaigns of both the Israeli government and right-wing settler organizations like the Ir David Foundation.

Keywords

Jerusalem; tourism; travel guides; Silwan; Ir David Foundation; Mount of Olives; Islamic art; pilgrimage.

“What should we see?” a diminutive American woman with a very pregnant daughter asked me as I waited at the Amsterdam airport for an Easy Jet flight to Tel Aviv.

“Are you on a pilgrimage?” I asked, catching her Texas drawl and equating, perhaps stereotypically, that distinctive accent with Southern Baptist piety.

“Oh, yes,” she replied happily, as other members of her family group trailed into the boarding area and her husband began handing out sandwiches from the airport’s McDonald’s.

“Oh, I love bacon,” the mother exclaimed, looking at me. I appreciated her capacity to find happiness even in the crowded boarding area but refrained from mentioning the difficulties of bacon location in the Holy Land. Instead I enquired: “Do you already have a program

in Jerusalem?” I was fairly certain that I was not the right person to provide an itinerary to this particular ensemble.

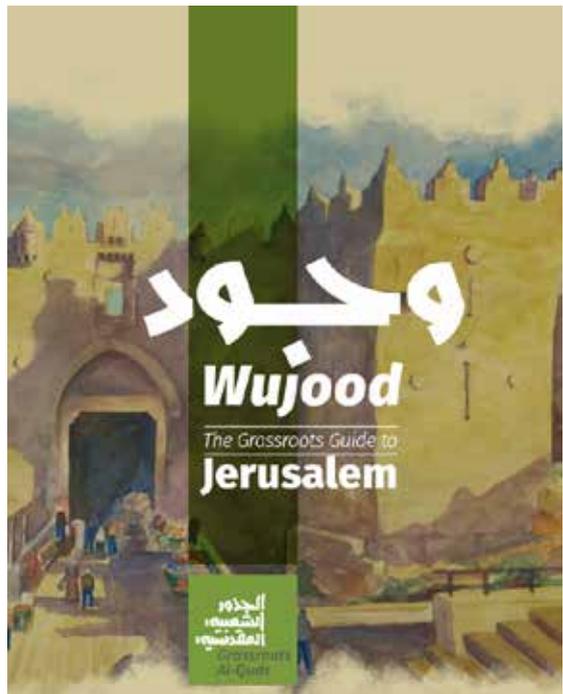
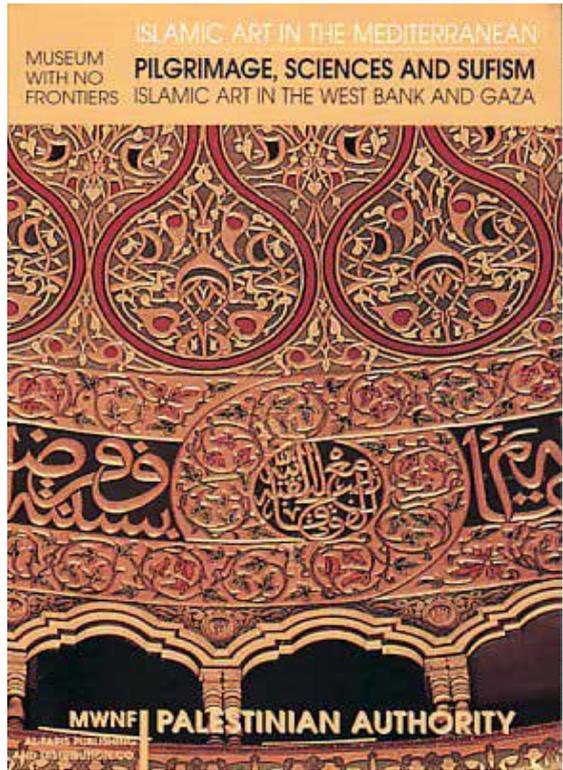
“Oh yes, we are going to the City of David. And then....” She hesitated groping for a name.

“The Holy Sepulcher,” I suggested.

“Ah, perhaps yes, that church.” The daughter began to ask me what she could bring back for her husband and the mother wanted additional shopping tips. I feebly noted that they will find many shops in the Old City with interesting gifts. Both gave me a kindly look but then turned away from the world’s most boring trip advisor.

Afterwards, I was puzzled. It seemed strange that the first stop of a devoted Christian group was the City of David, a massive project by the Ir David Foundation, known as Elad (acronym for El Ir David, “to the City of David”) the zealot settler organization that has taken over Palestinian property in several areas of Jerusalem, including in the village of Silwan, the location of the ever-growing City of David national park.

Recently a friend in Delhi had asked me to advise a colleague during her first trip to Jerusalem. But she also already had a program – and her first stop was also a tour of the City of David and the tunnels, a tour that lasted so long that she had to text me that we could no longer get together. Why, I wondered, was the City of David such a magnet?



I turned to Tripadvisor and asked for top sites in Jerusalem. The City of David and the Tunnel tours both were rewarded with certificates of excellence and a panoply of tours with Israeli guides was advertised. They were not the only choices, of course, and Tripadvisor recommendations shift with the clicks, but nonetheless it was telling. (And indeed since I clicked on the City of David tours, I cannot get rid of annoying advertisements popping up whenever I open any internet site).

Not as telling, however, as the self-advertisements of the Ir David Foundation for its eponymous City of David tours. Significantly, for my bewildered group of American pilgrims, Ir David embarked at least a decade ago on a massive marketing campaign that saw visitors to its site rising from 25,000 in 2001 to almost half a million (450,000) in 2011. And more recently, in February of 2019, Israel's ambassador to the United Nations Danny Danon managed to cajole forty of his United Nations colleagues to the site "in defiance of UNESCO," as Ir David crowed on its website.

Thus, when I picked up *Wujood: A Grassroots Guide to Jerusalem*, I breathed a sigh of relief. I turned immediately to its section on Silwan where the authors address the City of David and cogently explain:

In addition to seizing Palestinian property, the Elad foundation administers the "national park" known as the "City of David." This is the name the occupation has bestowed upon a natural and archaeological area in Silwan covering 24 dunums and extending from Al Dhuhur (Ophel) ridge south of the Old City's walls to the Silwan Spring and its Red Pool. This area contains a plethora of archaeological and historical finds discovered thanks to the excavations that have been taking place in Silwan since the mid-19th century. The "national park" is officially registered under the administration of the Israel Nature and Parks Authority and the Jerusalem occupation municipality. Elad, however has been granted an exclusive permit to manage and control it since 1997. This de facto administration of the park by Elad has made the distinction between the settler group and the "City of David" virtually impossible.

While Elad's activities are mainly in the Wadi Hilwa in north Silwan, a companion extremist settler group, Ateret Cohanim, is deeply involved in the takeover of Palestinian property in the Batan al-Hawa neighborhood, and *Wujood* (existence, in Arabic) provides a detailed and illuminating example. The authors also add that Silwan's main spring, once the source of Jerusalem's fresh water, is now dry, as is the 'Ayn al-Lawza spring. The gardens of Silwan, irrigated by these springs in the past, were so famous for abundant crops of parsley, mint, and, especially, chard that a mocking popular proverb in Jerusalem was, "Are you coming to sell chard in Silwan?" I wondered what the proverb of today might be. Given the demolition of Palestinian houses and property in that beleaguered community, one might propose: "Are you coming with a bulldozer to Silwan?"

Wujood's analysis of Silwan is obviously to the point. While *Wujood* addresses the Old City in some detail, it is the extensive sections on forty Palestinian neighborhoods, towns, and villages near Jerusalem – from Kufr 'Aqab and Jaba' in the north, to

Sur Bahir and al-Walaja in the south, that are the strongest part of the book for this reader. However, I doubted my American pilgrims – or indeed the better-informed visitor from Delhi – would be clutching a copy of *Wujood*. Described as a “political guidebook,” at 433 pages it is anything but a handy pocket guide. Indeed, the first 140 pages, in addition to helpful information on getting around the country (including a list of all Palestinian bus routes) and traversing the Israeli airport, contain a series of impressive briefings on key political issues in Jerusalem: planning, legal issues, education, Jerusalem after the wall, and more. This is a hefty dose of political analysis before an interested visitor finally is guided to the sites of the city. It is thus helpful that the guide is available in clickable sections (plus interactive maps) on Grassroots Jerusalem’s website (online at www.grassrootsalquds.net/).

As I read on, I began to ponder the fate of Palestinian guides to Jerusalem and the challenges of well-financed Israeli (and indeed settler) campaigns to capture the tourist market and dominate the story (or stories) of Jerusalem. I remembered another Palestinian guide to Jerusalem and other sites in Palestine, the 2004 publication *Pilgrimage, Sciences and Sufism: Islamic Art in the West Bank and Gaza* (henceforth *Pilgrimage*). This attractive volume brought together an impressive group of Palestinian scholars – Yusuf Natsheh, Nazmi Jubeh, Mahmoud Hawari, Marwan Abu Khalaf, Naseer Arafat, and Mu‘en Sadeq – offering itineraries to the Haram al-Sharif, Sufi institutions in Jerusalem, and the pilgrimage road between Jerusalem and Hebron, among others. Natsheh, for example, takes us on a tour of the Old City’s madrassas (beautifully photographed by Issa Freij), and also offers a description of the waqf system and the daily life of a student at a madrasa. And notably, Sadeq provided an itinerary of “Gaza, the Gate to Africa,” a stark reminder that this guide was written when Gaza was not in perpetual lockdown.

Pilgrimage was a project of the Museum with No Frontiers and the Palestinian Authority and carries the stamp of a number of post-Oslo projects that featured both international cooperation (and funding) and a hopeful outlook on a future Palestine. Perhaps some of the differences in the two guides were not only those of the more scholarly framework of *Pilgrimage* versus the more activist framework of *Wujood*, but also reflected the times in which they were written. Writing an honest tourist guide to today’s Jerusalem is indeed complicated and *Wujood* has high marks for honesty. The dilemma, of course, is how to engage visitors. On the website, *Wujood* opens with a cheerful, American-accented voice who enquires “Visiting Jerusalem?” “Looking for a Palestinian experience?” and goes on to promise the “most inspiring journey of your life,” as well as specific promises of delicious food and good and generous people. There is also the attractive claim that, “The fragmented nature of the city today is reunited in this book.” *Wujood* does try to project a multidimensional vision of the city but this vision is largely located in the past. Thus, the authors write: “The various places of worship that bespeckle the Old City are evidence of the fluidity and diversity that once characterized it. The proof? In the ‘Muslim Quarter’ there are 11 churches, and in the ‘Christian Quarter’ there are six mosques.”

The dilemma of honesty versus attraction is present in the descriptions of Palestinian neighborhoods and villages. Take, for example, the section on al-‘Ayzariya (Bethany), one of Jerusalem’s larger towns and a site that is, as *Wujood* notes, “the fourth most sacred site for Christians, following Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Nazareth.” (In the

biblical account, Bethany is where Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead). *Wujood* describes the Tomb of Lazarus – even offering a warning about its slippery steps – as well as the Eastern Orthodox celebration of Lazarus Saturday, the day before Palm Sunday. Intertwined with this information are the many problems facing the town, part of which is classified Area B and part Area C (where Israel has complete control). Then there are the checkpoints and the Wall. It is a window into Palestine today, but the question of course is who will look and who will be engaged enough to visit the town.

The itineraries in *Pilgrimage* are perhaps more tempting for some visitors. Describing the ancient pilgrimage road between Jerusalem and Hebron, for example, al-Jubeih invites the visitor: “On our way from Jerusalem to Hebron we will visit some of the sites that played a vital role in shaping the Islamic history of Palestine. The visitor will also enjoy the natural and magnificent landscape, including the terraces that protected the soil from erosion and the watchtowers scattered along the road.”

Pilgrimage and *Wujood* can complement each other. For example, both volumes offer the reader advice on visiting the Mount of Olives. *Wujood* simply describes the Chapel of the Ascension (where Jesus was said to rise to heaven), while *Pilgrimage* adds the history of this site as a church in the Byzantine period, restored by the Crusaders, and then converted into the mosque that bears the name Mosque of Qubbat al-Su‘ud, and indeed is still an Islamic waqf. *Wujood* in turn widens our understanding by describing the village of al-Tur and its problems, including the two settler outposts on the Mount of Olives. (And both volumes prompted me to visit the site!)

Wujood, like any guide, has its weaknesses. In the “Around Palestine” section, the authors offer brief descriptions of cities – from Acre and Haifa to Jericho – that sometimes seem hastily assembled. While the guide to the Old City of Jerusalem is attentive to religious sites, it is disconcerting for a guide to Bethlehem not to mention the Church of the Nativity. This being said, I appreciated the information on Dahaysha and ‘Ayda refugee camps and their community institutions. The erratic use of quotation marks around Israel or Israeli might also deter some readers. And this reader would appreciate an acknowledgement of all of the writers and contributors to this quite unique initiative.

As far as I can ascertain, *Pilgrimage* is out of print, although a Kindle edition is advertised on Amazon. Even Jerusalem’s most active Palestinian bookseller – Mahmoud Muna – has only a vague memory of it, telling me, “Perhaps I have a copy of it around somewhere.” (We also recalled another good guide that is not available in Jerusalem and should be, George Azar and Mariam Shaheen’s *Palestine: A Guide*, published by Interlink in 2007 and still available from Interlink’s website). I would very much recommend a reprint of *Pilgrimage*, with or without an update – we need more Palestinian guides to Jerusalem and our other habitats, not less.

And here is another service of both *Wujood* and *Pilgrimage*, not only for the novice tourist or even for the immense challenge of countering the Israeli narrative on Jerusalem, but for us, the inhabitants of fragmented Palestine. We are also deterred by checkpoint fatigue from taking a stroll down the Mount of Olives to the Old City or checking out a half-remembered site. Our political losses become personal losses as we inhabit a shrinking Palestine and consider a visit to a Jerusalem neighborhood or

even a walk in the Old City as just too much trouble – or indeed impossible without a permit. Looking at the carefully compiled lists of community organizations for each locale in *Wujood*, I also confronted my own ignorance.

Grassroots Jerusalem then also addresses us, not only in *Wujood* but also in its many projects in the city. Partnering with Youth for Jerusalem and ArtlabGrassroots, the Old City Tales project trained nineteen young girls in story-telling (and improving their English language skills) and photography to explore their city (and offers to take tourists on the route of the tales). One girl’s narrative, “Still Living,” might speak to all of us:

Though I’ve always considered myself part of Jerusalem, I knew almost nothing about my city. My journey began by asking myself what’s the real story of Jerusalem. I became a tourist in my own home. I began exploring and asking people about their stories, the stories they heard when they were young, and the stories they want to pass on to the next generation. It was hard to get people to tell their real stories. Perhaps they were afraid or they’d gone through such hard experiences that they didn’t want others to see their wounds. To get the stories I wanted I had to visit different people from different communities and ethnicities, and most of all I had to dig deep. The journey was difficult but I enjoyed every bit of it because I found things that I never imagined were there. I heard stories that left me breathless. Stories of sorrow and despair. Stories I’d otherwise have to hear from the news or read about in books. I had never realized the source was next to me.

Penny Johnson is a member of the Editorial Committee of the Jerusalem Quarterly. Her most recent book is Companions in Conflict: Animals in Occupied Palestine (Melville House Books, New York, 2019).