

# Pilgrims and Pilgrimage

Jacob Norris, Guest Editor

To study the world of pilgrimage in Palestine is to delve into the very fabric of Palestinian society. Perhaps more than anywhere else on the planet, Palestine, and particularly Jerusalem, is indelibly associated with pilgrimage. The landscape is littered with sites – shrines, tombs, caves, springs, mountains – which have for millennia attracted worshippers from near and far. Performing pilgrimage and welcoming others performing pilgrimage has been an integral part of Palestinian life for as long as history records. Little wonder, then, that this special issue of *JQ* provides the reader with a treasure trove of observations, analyses, vignettes, and snapshots of Palestinian society in all its beguiling complexity.

So often, our understanding of pilgrimage in Palestine is mediated through the eyes of outsiders. In these accounts, Palestine and its inhabitants tend to be objectified, fossilized, and romanticized, washing over the dynamic ways in which Palestinians themselves engage with pilgrimage. The articles and essays in this edition of *JQ* push back against that trend, examining from different angles how pilgrimage has been a driving force within Palestinian society. In a country so saturated in the rituals of pilgrimage, interactions in and around shrines become a key catalyst for socioeconomic and political change.

To embark on a pilgrimage is to transport oneself beyond the boundaries of our material existence, yet also to engage in a very physical journey that requires constant social interaction. The transformative potential of this double-sided journey has long interested scholars of pilgrimage. In western anthropology, Edith and Victor Turner famously characterized

Christian pilgrimage as a “liminoid” experience – a ritual that involves the temporary abandonment of familiar structures and a testing ground for new social possibilities.<sup>1</sup>

The Turners’ observations have been sharply critiqued over the years, but the transcendental nature of pilgrimage remains a central theme for many scholars, both religious and secular.<sup>2</sup> Islamic jurists, for example, have long explored the importance of pilgrimage as a transition into an otherworldly state where closer communion with God becomes possible.<sup>3</sup> But as in most religious traditions, Muslim pilgrimage is no solitary enterprise. For pilgrims on Hajj, the transition is marked by a change into plain clothing, coupled with a series of communal rituals, all aiming towards the forging of a universal Muslim community where distinctions of class and sect are eroded. This interface between the inward, spiritual journey and the essentially social context in which it takes place is what makes pilgrimage such a fruitful topic for scholars of social history. My own work on Bethlehem in the nineteenth century is a case in point. My initial interest in the town’s history was focused on the global migrations carried out by Bethlehemites in this period and how these movements in turn influenced life back in the town. But it became impossible to understand these movements without an appreciation of how Bethlehem’s long held status as a pilgrimage center had given local residents the tools to begin trading abroad.<sup>4</sup>

In Bethlehem, pilgrimage is not just a factor in the town’s development; it defines the very identity and economic livelihood of its residents. This is not a straightforward process of western objectification through the biblical lens. The town has long been an important site for Muslims and Jews, as witnessed by Muslim and Jewish travel accounts stretching back at least a millennium, as well as the presence of the town’s longstanding Muslim community, the so-called Harat al-Fawaghra.<sup>5</sup>

More recently, Bethlehem has repositioned itself as a magnet for a more secular type of pilgrim: activists drawn to the town’s plethora of NGOs, cultural institutes, and refugee community groups to express their solidarity with the Palestinian struggle. But whoever the visitor, the most interesting feature of this process for me is how Bethlehemites have been active players in the projection of their identity to the outside world. Centuries of interaction with pilgrims have given them a deep-seated sense of their own importance as the inhabitants of such a globally significant town, yet at the same time the ability to adapt to new ways of defining that importance. This is no mere “performance”; rather it is the symbiotic interplay between locals and outsiders that defines all pilgrimage societies.

I have been fascinated to read through the various contributions in this issue of *JQ* and learn how these interactions play out within other pilgrimage contexts in Palestine. In Chris Wilson’s innovative study of how “religious mania” was diagnosed and treated during the mandate period, pilgrimage appears as both cause and cure. Here the powerful, sometimes debilitating, experience of pilgrimage in Palestine is expertly contextualized within the prevailing intellectual, medical, and political paradigms of British colonial rule. Refusing to separate out European and Palestinian ways of understanding these states of rapture, Wilson reminds us that pilgrimage has long been a great leveler within Palestinian society.

Mustafa Abbasi, meanwhile, provides a valuable account of how pilgrimage has shaped not just the spiritual lives of Palestinians, but also their social ones. As the quintessential pilgrimage way station, the village of Abu Ghush (and the family from whose name it derives), owes its very existence to the pilgrimage routes that ran from Jaffa, up through the Bab al-Wad pass and on to Jerusalem. Describing how the Abu Ghush family expertly positioned itself in the eyes of the Ottoman state as a vital facilitator of those lucrative pilgrimage routes, Abbasi demonstrates how European pilgrims were often at the mercy of local Palestinian actors, at least until the end of the nineteenth century.

Thomas Hummel's article flips the perspective to examine the theological ways in which Christians of various denominations have understood pilgrimage to Jerusalem as a sacrament. Despite official doctrine to the contrary, Hummel demonstrates how Protestants, Catholics, and Orthodox Christians have all described pilgrimage to Jerusalem in the language of sacramental theology. The resulting impression is the re-emergence of the physical Jerusalem into the Christian limelight, serving as a gateway to the heavenly Jerusalem that so often dominates Christian thought on the subject.

Jerusalem also forms the focus of Mick Dumper's contribution, but this time in the context of the city's contested status within the Palestinian-Zionist conflict. Walking us through his comparative methodology, Dumper arrives at the sobering conclusion that there are certain features of Jerusalem's status as a 'holy city' that preclude the peaceful resolution of the conflict and with it the various forms of colonial control that define Palestinian life there. Dumper asserts that the most important of all these features, and one that sets Jerusalem apart from the other cities he has studied, is its centrality to the foundation myths of the world's three major monotheistic faiths.

Jerusalem occupies a central position within Palestine's sacral landscape, but it should be viewed as just one nodal point within a network of pilgrimage sites that span the entire region. Alex Shams concentrates on one such site, Joseph's Tomb (*Qabr Yusuf*) in Nablus, and the way it has become associated among Palestinians with Zionist colonization. Shams takes care to remind us how local vernacular attachments to these smaller pilgrimage shrines (*maqamat*) had developed over centuries among Palestinians (Muslims, Christians, and Jews) before the intrusion of western biblical archaeology in the nineteenth century. That process of appropriation, argues Shams, has greatly accelerated in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries under Israeli occupation, to the point where local Nabulsi have attempted to desecrate Qabr Yusuf on a number of occasions.

But Palestinians' interactions with foreign pilgrims are not always steeped in violence and tension. For centuries, Palestinians have depended on pilgrims arriving from abroad for their economic livelihood. In many instances these interactions have enabled a creative process, leading to new cultural forms. Marie-Armelle Beaulieu's essay on Jerusalem tattoos provides a classic example. In the post-Crusader period, European pilgrims became increasingly interested in the ancient practice of tattooing among local Christians in the Jerusalem area. Adapting their designs to cater to Catholic sensibilities (in particular the Crusader "Jerusalem Cross"), local tattooists did a roaring

trade among European pilgrims from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries. More recently, this art has been revived in Jerusalem, tapping into global trends in fashion and demonstrating once again how pilgrimage is continually reshaping cultural and economic life in Palestine.

As well as the written contributions, we are treated in this special issue to two photo essays by Jean-Michel de Tarragon and Arpan Roy, both on the theme of pilgrimage. In Tarragon's essay we are guided through a fascinating selection from the vast photographic archive held at the École biblique et archéologique française in Jerusalem. Meanwhile Roy's essay on sacred trees offers a thought-provoking journey into some of the sites first discussed in Taufiq Canaan's famous essay *Mohammedan Saints and Sanctuaries*, both updating our knowledge of what has subsequently happened to these sites and suggesting ways we might rethink their meanings to Palestinians. Together, these photo essays bring to life in dazzling visual form the same set of themes discussed in the other articles: spiritual rapture, communal ritual, the materiality and embodied experience of pilgrimage, local agency versus foreign appropriation, and above all the extent to which pilgrimage is embedded in Palestinian life and the Palestinian landscape.

In the section titled Letter from Jerusalem, George Hintlian provides an overview of two thousand years of Christian Pilgrimage to the Holy Land. He traces the shifting economics of pilgrimage from the early Byzantine and Crusader period to the onset of packaged tourism of sacred spaces in the early twentieth century. Tourist guides of the city—now numbering over 5,000 in English alone—leave a written testimony of the changing spots that attracted Christian piety to Jerusalem.

Finally, we are pleased to include in this issue an excellent piece of scholarly writing that steps outside the pilgrimage theme. Chloe Bordewich unravels the mystery of the Jerusalem-based Ottoman intelligence officer, 'Aziz Bey, and in so doing confronts the Arab world's struggle with its Ottoman past. Also, Helga Baumgarten provides us with a detailed review of Angelos Dalachanis and Vincent Lemire's edited volume, *Ordinary Jerusalem, 1840–1940*.

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## Endnotes

- 1 Edith Turner and Victor Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978).
- 2 Most of the criticism of the Turners' work has focused on their creation of an artificial distinction between the "liminoid" state of pilgrimage and people's everyday lives. For a summary, see Simon Coleman and John Eade, eds., *Reframing Pilgrimage: Cultures in Motion* (Oxfordshire and New York: Routledge, 2004), 1–25.
- 3 See Nur al-Din 'Itr, *al-Hajj wa-al-'umrah fi al-fiqh al-Islami* (Aleppo: al-Maktabah al-'Arabiyah, 1969); Muhammad Jawad

- Maghniyyah, *The Hajj According to Five Schools of Islamic Law* (Tehran: Alhoda, 1997); and Dale Eickelman and James Piscatori, eds., *Muslim Travellers: Pilgrimage, Migration, and the Religious Imagination* (University of California Press, 1990).
- 4 For more detail, see Jacob Norris, “Exporting the Holy Land: Artisans and Merchant Migrants in Ottoman-Era Bethlehem,” *Journal of Middle East Migration Studies* 2 (2013): 14–40.
- 5 For two famous examples of Muslim pilgrimages to Bethlehem, see ‘Abd al-Ghani al-Nabulsi, *al-Haqiqa wa al-majaz fi al-rihla ila bilad al-Sham wa Misr wa al-hijaz*, ed. ‘Abd al-Hamid Murad (Damascus: Dar al-Ma‘rifa, 1989), 365; and Robert Dankoff and Sooyong Kim, eds., *An Ottoman Traveller: Selections from the Book of Travels of Evliya Çelebi* (London: Eland, 2010), 325–7.