

Pilgrims, Tourists, and the Bible

Changing Reasons for Traveling to the Holy Land

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1. Introduction

There is no more holy place for Christians than the land where Jesus was born, where he died and where he rose from the dead.¹ According to the Bible, Christians consider Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Galilee to be the constitutive origins of their faith. For believers no other place in the world plays a role as important as does this region. I must admit that it is not easy to talk about these places from a contemporary perspective. Many of us will undoubtedly recall the difficult history of the religions in the Near East throughout the last millennium, characterized by conflicts and the search for identity. The history of the Holy Land has many dark chapters, which are mostly somewhat ambiguous, since religion, culture, politics and geography are so closely intertwined there. This fact makes it extremely difficult to approach the history of the land that is called holy by the three major revelatory religions, by Christians, Jews and Muslims alike. As we know, the problems between the different cultures, religions and nations are still far from any solution. Sometimes things appear to be getting worse rather than better, and nobody really knows how peace can be built upon the experiences of conflict and violence.

Nonetheless, as a scholar of liturgy it is interesting for me to focus on the Christian people who have travelled to this land throughout the ages, and to try to understand their reason(s) for doing so. I would like to address the question of the way in which the travelers defined themselves, in other words, to focus on the reasons which led them to leave their homes in order to spend time at the places mentioned in the Bible. Equally interesting is the status of liturgical celebrations and rituals engaged in on the trip. Liturgy and rituals are by no means defining characteristics of pilgrimages and religious journeys. For the

¹ Editor's note: This article is the original version of a paper presented at the international colloquium on Religion and Tourism, October 24, 2013 in Tilburg. The lecture style has largely been maintained, though elaborated by annotations. The text builds upon the author's previous publications on the subject: S. BÖNTERT: *Friedlicher Kreuzzug und fromme Pilger. Liturgiehistorische Studien zur Heilig-Land-Wallfahrt im Spiegel deutschsprachiger Pilgerberichte des späten 19. Jahrhunderts* (= Liturgia condenda 27) (Leuven / Paris / Walpole, MA 2013); IDEM: 'Im Spannungsfeld von Wallfahrt und Kulturbegennung. Gottesdienst und Brauchtum christlicher Pilger im Nahen Osten', in C. KRAFT & E. TIEFENSEE (Hg.): *Religion und Migration. Frömmigkeitsformen und kulturelle Deutungssysteme auf Wanderschaft* (= Vorlesungen des interdisziplinären Forums Religion 7) (Münster 2011) 79-96, 195-198.

pilgrims, the value of celebrating liturgy and rituals was understood as simply part of the trip. We know that they frequently took part in different kinds of liturgy or in rituals for worshipping God in Jerusalem or Bethlehem. These were the elements of the trip that were exclusively religious in character, involving purely religious practice.

Since this is true, further research is necessary. We still do not know much about the way in which the liturgies and rituals were influenced by cultural circumstances.² Fortunately, we do have many liturgical books that reveal the order of the celebrations and how these developed in the course of time, from ancient times to the twentieth century. While liturgical books are important, however, they are not in and of themselves sufficient to reveal a full picture. In most cases they were edited by church officials and do not contain information about what really took place. Ritual studies has taught us that liturgical books show us only the scripts and do not give us a description of the performance of the ritual process.³ Rather than being records of what really took place, liturgical books merely describe the rules to be followed in the performance. To discover more details we need to take a closer look at the way the travelers defined themselves. How did they integrate liturgy and rituals into their concept of pilgrimage? What changes have taken place since the earliest pilgrimages and those in more recent times – and why?

In my paper I will examine a number of examples taken from the history of pilgrimages to the Holy Land from German speaking countries. Several of the German and Austrian pilgrims who travelled to biblical places wrote down not only their personal experiences but also their idea of what a devout pilgrim should be like. Their letters, diaries and other kinds of records reveal the concept of pilgrimage to which they adhered during their trip. They demonstrate that the pilgrims were receptive to a variety of influences. The main catalysts contributing to the reality of pilgrimages were varying conglomerates of religion and culture. While it is impossible for my study to be truly representative, and additional research is certainly required, I do nonetheless hope to reveal the main tendencies that can be observed and the way in which these have developed over the course of history.

² For modern times, see P. POST, J. PIEPER & M. VAN UDEN: *The modern pilgrim. Multi-disciplinary explorations of Christian pilgrimage* (= Liturgia condenda 8) (Leuven 1998).

³ Cf. L. VAN TONGEREN: 'Eine gemeinsame Zielrichtung. Die *ritual studies* und die Entwicklungen in der Liturgiegeschichtsforschung', in B. KRANEMANN & P. POST (eds.): *Die modernen ritual studies als Herausforderung für die Liturgiewissenschaft. Modern ritual studies as a challenge for liturgical studies* (= Liturgia condenda 20) (Leuven / Paris / Dudley, MA 2009) 111-132.

2. Christian antiquity

The beginnings of pilgrimage to the Holy Land are generally dated to the fourth century. We have many diaries and records written by pilgrims dating back to that period.⁴ As the texts show us, most of the pilgrims at the time were deeply interested in the rituals and liturgies celebrated at the holy places. It is certainly no coincidence that during this period the pilgrims focused on the celebrations in a very detailed way. For them the prayers, readings or other rituals played a key role. They usually attended masses, processions or other kinds of devotional festivities and tried to interpret their impressions in the light of the biblical texts they knew from their Christian background.⁵

Many historical examples could be given of pilgrims who visited Jerusalem or Bethlehem and were deeply interested in the celebrations. One of the most prominent people who left a record of their experiences is without a doubt Egeria, a woman who was probably a member of a religious congregation. More than anything else, Egeria's idea of pilgrimage is shaped by rituals and liturgies.

Aside from the fact that it is amazing enough that a woman should appear as a traveler, Egeria offers us a deep insight into the relationship between liturgical action, the reading of the bible and the holy places. At the same time, she reveals a very particular understanding of liturgical worship. To this day Egeria is seen as the main representative of a concept of pilgrimage resting largely upon the principle of imitation. This should be understood in the following way: The pilgrims would gather – particularly in Jerusalem – at the places where, according to the gospels, Jesus had been active. At the individual locations the relevant passage from the New Testament would be read that related to the place in question. The readings were followed by prayers, songs, and rituals. The process was characterized by imitative memory, as the pilgrim herself describes in her diary:⁶

And what I admire and value most is that all the hymns and antiphons and readings they have, and all the prayers the bishop says, are always relevant to the day which is being observed and to the place in which they are used. They never fail to be appropriate.

⁴ Cf. J.-P. RUBIÉS: 'Travel writing as a genre. Facts, fiction and the invention of a scientific discourse in early modern Europe', in IDEM: *Travellers and cosmographers. Studies in the history of early modern travel and ethnology* (Aldershot 2007) 5-35; J. ELSNER & I. RUTHERFORD (eds.): *Pilgrimage in Graeco-Roman & early Christian antiquity. Seeing the Gods* (Oxford 2005); E.D. HUNT: *Holy Land pilgrimage in the later Roman Empire 312-460* (Oxford 1982).

⁵ Cf. BÖNTERT: *Friedlicher Kreuzzug und fromme Pilger* 120-124; IDEM: 'Im Spannungsfeld von Wallfahrt und Kulturbegennung' 86-88.

⁶ EGERIA: *Itinerarium* 47, 5 (J. WILKINSON: *Egeria's travels to the Holy Land. Newly translated with supporting documents and notes* (Jerusalem / Warminster 1981, revised edition) 146).

By visiting the places where Jesus had been and reading the appropriate bible passages, a bridge to the past was constructed, bringing it into the present and promising an encounter with Jesus. In this way, biblical history passed before the pilgrims' eyes. They experienced it as devout believers and, interestingly also, as contemporaries.

Unfortunately, we do not have enough sources to be able to get a clear picture of the late-antique praxis of pilgrimage. Nonetheless, we do know enough to conclude that the motives for taking part in pilgrimages were principally religious and that other influences did not yet play a noteworthy role in these events. Early-Christian reports by pilgrims do not point to other motives beyond the religious aspects.

3. High and late Middle Ages

When we turn to the Middle Ages, we cannot get around the Crusades.⁷ My paper is not the place for a detailed analysis of pilgrimage at the time of the Crusaders between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries. The decisive difference between pilgrimages in this era and early Christian times is that these pilgrimages were now deeply marked by interaction with the foreign religion and culture of Islam. If we take a closer look at the results of modern studies of the Crusades, as well as the literary study of the reports of pilgrims, the influence in pilgrimages of political and military efforts to rule becomes very clear. An alliance characterized by a distinctly religious sense of mission was forged against the increasingly powerful Islam.

How did the pilgrims' self-understanding and their focus on liturgy look at this time?⁸ How strong was their personal awareness of the various influences at work? Particularly illustrative material in this regard is offered by the pilgrims' reports edited in the late Middle Ages and early modern times. If we ask why a person set out on the way, the first thing we need to take into consideration is the religious point of view. An important incentive was the conviction that in traveling to the Holy Land they would win a particularly effective form of forgiveness of sins. Many journeys were characterized by penitence and prayer. The pervasive notion of the transitoriness of all earthly things which so characterized the Middle Ages, the constant presence of death, and the fear of punishment of sins in the next world must have had a great influence. In such a spiritual-religious climate it is not surprising that pilgrimages were seen as a very promising source of aid for the health of the soul.

⁷ Cf. BÖNTERT: 'Im Spannungsfeld von Wallfahrt und Kulturbegennung' 88-91.

⁸ Cf. Ch.T. MAIER: 'Crisis, liturgy and the crusade in the twelfth and thirteenth century', in *Journal for ecclesiastical history* 48 (1997) 628-657; BÖNTERT: *Friedlicher Kreuzzug und fromme Pilger* 124-129.

In addition to the redemptive potential of the journey, its goal in the city of Jerusalem as the place of Jesus played a particularly significant role, Jerusalem being a central place in the Christians' view of the world. As maps show us and the diaries and records tell us, the Holy City was seen as the ruling center of the world, not only in a spiritual sense but also in a geographical sense.⁹

Certainly, all these essentially spiritual fruits must have ranked high on the pilgrims' list of concerns. However, the reports from this time also demonstrate how much the journey was about culture and identity. As a pilgrim one moved between curiosity and a spirit of adventure on the one hand,¹⁰ and a deep skepticism towards the people of the Orient, the Islamic faithful in particular, on the other. The reports reveal a high degree of reserve, even of serious disapproval of the foreign culture and religion. Sometimes the reports from the fifteenth century took the character of a new call to embark on a crusade, expressing sharp judgments, without, however, naming a single theological argument to back this up. In their reports pilgrims devote so much space to disputes with the Islamic world, that their journeys might be characterized as involving a complete repudiation of the strangers and their faith. This has even been described as a 'cold war of faith' between the pilgrims and the local inhabitants.¹¹

The effects of these tensions upon worship were significant. In contrast to the antique examples, we hardly find any descriptions of liturgical worship in the reports. The pilgrims also place much less emphasis on the liturgies celebrated in holy places than did their late-antique predecessors. We might speculate that this silence indicates that the liturgies were no longer able to spiritually fertilize the journeys. On the other hand, the liturgies might also be considered to be such standard and predictable elements of the journey that they were hardly worth reporting. More significant than these reasons, however, is the basic observation that the pilgrims paid far more attention to the religious-cultural conflicts than to the ritual events.¹²

⁹ Cf. I. BAUMGÄRTNER: 'Die Wahrnehmung Jerusalems auf mittelalterlichen Weltkarten', in D. BAUER, K. HERBERS & N. JASPERT (Hg.): *Jerusalem im Hoch- und Spätmittelalter. Konflikte und Konfliktbewältigung – Vorstellungen und Vergegenwärtigungen* (= Campus Historische Studien 29) (Frankfurt a. M. 2001) 271-334. The Jewish tradition is similar to that: M. TILLY: *Jerusalem – Nabel der Welt. Überlieferung und Funktionen von Heiligtumstraditionen im antiken Judentum* (Stuttgart 2002).

¹⁰ Cf. F.Th. NOONAN: *The road to Jerusalem. Pilgrimage and travel in the age of discovery* (Philadelphia 2007).

¹¹ U. GANZ-BLÄTTLER: *Andacht und Abenteuer. Berichte europäischer Jerusalem- und Santiago-Pilger (1320-1520)* (= Jakobus-Studien 4) (Tübingen 2000³) 203.

¹² Interesting examples are: UNION VERLAG BERLIN (Hg.): *Die Pilgerfahrt des Bruders Felix Faber ins Heilige Land, nach der ersten deutschen Ausgabe von 1556* (Berlin [1964]); F. TIMM: *Der Palästina-Pilgerbericht des Bernhard von Breidenbach und die Holzschnitte Erhard Reuwichs. Die Peregrinatio in terram sanctam (1486) als Propagandainstrument im Mantel der gelehrten Pilgerschrift* (Stuttgart 2006).

Let us summarize our findings. All in all, with the crusades and the centuries following them an era begins in which we find a strong combination of dimensions that we do not find in earlier sources. The pilgrimage event is marked both by spiritual processes *and* by an undeniable cultural interaction. It is hardly possible to distinguish between the religious journey on the one hand and the interaction of various religious identities on the other. From this point on, the pilgrimage as a means of coming close to the biblical story gave way to the concept of pilgrimage as a platform for cultural encounter and exchange.¹³ Alongside religious concepts, including that of worship, the element of cultural encounter began its ascent in the world of pilgrimage, starting on an extraordinary career that continues to this day. In the pilgrims' records of the late Middle Ages we can read that these two poles of the process of pilgrimage, rather than excluding each other, instead managed to maintain their position side by side, on an equal footing.

4. Nineteenth century

Let us make another jump in time. In many ways the pilgrimage of the late nineteenth century fits perfectly in the history of pilgrimage.¹⁴ This continuity is reflected first of all in the religious reasons for engaging in a tour to the Holy Land. The reasons are evidenced in the sources. The motives given testify to an understanding of holy places as places where one hopes to be able to encounter God, in a way that is not possible in ordinary, daily life. To visit the places of the Bible, to feel and touch them in a physical sense, to be able to reconstruct the familiar biblical stories, to personally participate in the salvation that God worked there, and to follow in the footsteps of Jesus – these elements constitute the core of the concept of pilgrimage in the late nineteenth century.

Indeed, from a religious point of view, the pilgrims remained on the path set by earlier generations. However, a new aspect appeared that up until this time had been largely unknown. The further the nineteenth century progressed, the more the phenomenon of tourism began to influence the idea of pilgrimage. Alongside personal piety and the desire for physical nearness to the biblical history of salvation, was a growing desire to break away from every-day routines, to experience adventure, to discover foreign cultures and landscapes, and to enjoy the amenities they had to offer.¹⁵

¹³ Cf. C. ZRENNER: *Die Berichte der europäischen Jerusalem-pilger (1475-1500). Ein literarischer Vergleich im historischen Kontext* (Frankfurt a. M. 1981); Ch. HIPLER: *Die Reise nach Jerusalem. Untersuchungen zu den Quellen, zum Inhalt und zur literarischen Struktur der Pilgerberichte des Spätmittelalters* (Frankfurt a. M. 1987); C. VON SAMSON-HIMMELSTJERNA: *Deutsche Pilger des Mittelalters im Spiegel ihrer Berichte und der mittelhochdeutschen erzählenden Dichtung* (Berlin 2004).

¹⁴ Cf. BÖNTERT: 'Im Spannungsfeld von Wallfahrt und Kulturbeggnung' 91-95.

¹⁵ Cf. BÖNTERT: *Friedlicher Kreuzzug und fromme Pilger* 439-470.

This was true particularly with respect to the outward and homeward journey, the vital importance of which in the trip as a whole comes out in the detailed descriptions of the pilgrims' impressions. Attention is paid first of all to the landscape and to cultural witnesses. The fascination of the pilgrims and their attention to the antique architecture of Greece, or their interest in the traditions of the Orient, reveal how much the traditional experience of pilgrimage was merging with a desire for cultural enrichment and development. The majority of pilgrims made considerable detours so as not to miss important cultural centers. In addition, a fascination for the landscape along the way became a significant consideration. Mountain landscapes, islands or seascapes and – last but not least – the local food were only some of the attractions that the pilgrims appeared to consider as integral and inseparable parts of their journeys.¹⁶

The huge influence of the aspect of tourism also put the liturgical celebrations and rituals in a new light. A look at the sources shows that the pilgrims certainly attended many liturgies, and that traditional practices played an important role. However, there is no denying that worship and ritual were slipping into the background, and were no longer described in such great detail. In many cases there is only a short mention of liturgies, and they are not described in as much detail as was the case in antiquity. This trend is true not only for one particular denomination, but is visible to the same extent across the board in all sources. Catholic and Protestant pilgrims evidently agreed that a pilgrimage should always include a variety of touristic elements alongside the religious realities. Clearly, they were convinced that the religious value of the trip was not affected by the tourist aspect. Christian travelers on pilgrimages to the Holy Land in the nineteenth century considered themselves simultaneously as pilgrims and tourists.¹⁷

5. Conclusion

In my journey through the history of pilgrimage to the Holy Land it has been possible only to touch on a few examples from German speaking countries. A more complete picture would be revealed by the study of additional source

¹⁶ Very revealing examples are P.W. VON KEPPLER: *Wanderfahrten und Wallfahrten im Orient* (Freiburg 1895²) 34-48; H. GEIGER: *Pilgerfahrt nach Jerusalem und Rom vom 26. April bis 22. Juni 1886. Gedenkblatt der IX. Münchener Karawane* (München 1886) 21; B. BAUER: *Nach dem heiligen Lande. Reise nach Italien, Ägypten und Palästina* (Radolfzell 1893²) 104; P. LIMBERG: *Der „Kölner“ Frühjahrs-Pilger-Karawane Wander- und Wallfahrten nach Jerusalem und Rom im Jubeljahr 1900. Pilgerbericht erstattet unter Benutzung des Tagebuches der Karawane* (Kempten 1901) 4.

¹⁷ Cf. D. BAR & K. COHEN-HATTAB: 'A new kind of pilgrimage. The modern tourist pilgrim of nineteenth century and early twentieth century Palestine', in *Middle Eastern studies* 39 (2003) 141-148; BÖNTERT: *Friedlicher Kreuzzug und fromme Pilger* 260-265, 465-467.

material.¹⁸ However, in spite of the limited nature of this work, it is undeniable that the concept of the journey and the significance of the liturgy and other rituals within this concept do not remain the same throughout history. Reports by pilgrims over the centuries clearly show that cultural influences and mindsets particular to certain time periods had a significant influence upon the events. This journey through time has demonstrated that it was only in the early phase of pilgrimages to the Holy Land that the religious aspect was of greatest importance and constituted virtually the entire experience. The various interpretations and forms of pilgrimage from the Middle Ages until the twentieth century reveal that pilgrimage provided a way to grapple with one's own and with other cultures.¹⁹

I hope that my examples have demonstrated that the liturgical side of the event cannot claim a special role in this process.²⁰ Although in concrete ritual practice it may be possible to trace continuity, and even uniformity, we must assume that liturgical events were evaluated with respect to their meaning and function in a variety of ways. The close of the nineteenth century marks a definite break in the history of pilgrimage. From this point onwards pilgrimage as a means of experiencing closeness to the biblical story of salvation is extended more and more by its being viewed and experienced as tourist trip, a journey leading to a tourist destination. The history of the twentieth century has demonstrated that the touristic function has continued to the present day. It is no longer possible to imagine a pilgrimage to the Holy Land that does not have this broad character.

However, the example of the pilgrimage to biblical locations is not only interesting from a historical perspective. It is related to a basic insight that should guide the study of pilgrims and their rituals. For it seems that the motives for and the functions of pilgrimage derive from a basic notion that is largely independent of history. By the end of the nineteenth century at the latest, it has become difficult to distinguish a journey with specifically religious motives from any other journey. Pilgrimage researchers Elsner and Rutherford make the following observation:²¹

It is extremely difficult, perhaps impossible to determine the boundaries between pilgrimage proper (if there is such a thing) and other kinds of travel such as tourism. Indeed, one might say that for the religious minded (or for those with a tendency to become so) any kind of journey has the potential to become a pilgrimage.

¹⁸ For the place of the Holy Land in the imagination of contemporary pilgrims from USA see the new study by H. KAELL: *Walking where Jesus walked. American Christians and Holy Land Pilgrimage* (New York 2014).

¹⁹ Cf. M. STAUSBERG: *Religion and tourism. Crossroads, destinations and encounters* (London / New York 2011).

²⁰ Cf. BÖNTERT: 'Im Spannungsfeld von Wallfahrt und Kulturbegegnung' 95-96.

²¹ J. ELSNER & I. RUTHERFORD: 'Introduction', in IDEM (eds.): *Pilgrimage in Graeco-Roman and early Christian antiquity* 1-38, p. 5.

This conclusion is significant for me as a liturgist because it broadens my perspective and demonstrates the interdisciplinary nature of the study of theology, worship and culture. It would be fascinating to set other liturgical forms besides pilgrimage in dialogue with culture studies, in order to examine their relation to culture. There are many other fields deserving additional study.

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