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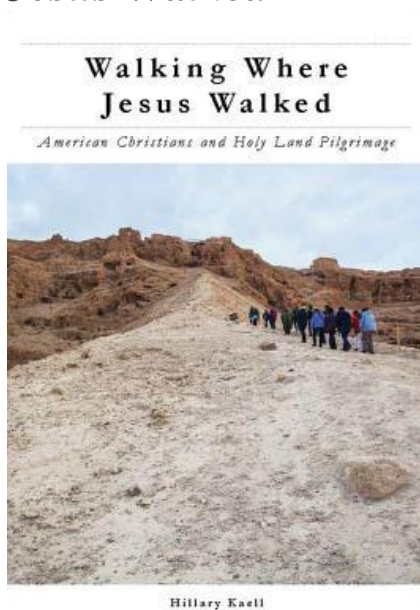


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Imagined Israel: The Problem of Pilgrimage in the Holy Land

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Michael A. Di Giovine on Hillary Kaell's *Walking Where Jesus Walked*



Hillary Kaell, *Walking Where Jesus Walked: American Christians and Holy Land Pilgrimage*. NY: New York University Press, 2014, xi+269 pp, \$28 (paperback).

Christian pilgrimage to the Holy Land is a longstanding tradition; our earliest evidence comes from travelers in Late Antiquity such as Egeria and the Bordeaux pilgrim who journeyed to Jerusalem when Roman emperor Constantine legalized the religion. Since then, the sites associated with Jesus' life have captivated the imaginaries of Crusaders, explorers, proto-archaeologists, and modern literary travelers, such as Herman Melville and Mark Twain, and today form a multi-billion-dollar global industry.

The study of pilgrimage generally mirrors the sentiments of pilgrims themselves, in that it has been traditionally suffused with tensions stemming from a number of contradictory experiences travelers confront. How can they be modern if they are engaging in such an age-old, almost medieval tradition? Does it count as serious pilgrimage if they avail themselves of commercial experiences and ludic activities staged by the tourism industry? Why do they travel far distances to resolve issues in their home lives? Why do they publically perform such devotional practices if they feel that it is inherently a

private, “interior journey” on which they are embarking? Do Protestants even recognize pilgrimage as a viable category, since most denominations (though not all) privilege direct and unmediated interaction with the Divine through prayer over the ritualized, materialistic, place-centered practices that mark Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy?

In this context, Hillary Kaell’s *Walking Where Jesus Walked: American Christians and Holy Land Pilgrimage* is a fascinating and sensitive look at Catholic and Evangelical Protestant travelers to the biblical origin of their faiths. While there are numerous studies on Holy Land pilgrimage in a variety of languages that focus on a diversity of time periods and demographics, Kaell’s is not only one of the first to center squarely on contemporary American travelers, but it also does so through the holistic approach of following pilgrims—whom she calls the “foot soldiers” of this profitable travel industry—before, during, and after the trip itself. Her work is based on ethnographic research—the qualitative bread-and-butter of anthropological inquiry—including participant observation (interacting with and observing her subjects while participating as a pilgrim), open-ended interviews, and some survey research. As a result, this well-organized and eminently readable monograph is punctuated by thick description and illuminating, often quite emotionally engaging interviews that bring its pilgrim voices to life.

The binary oppositions between ancient/modern, pilgrimage/tourism, religion/commercialism, public/private, interior/exterior, and Catholic/Protestant in Holy Land pilgrimage structure Kaell’s book. In particular, she argues that a common thread linking all of these dualities is the way that the actors negotiate a “problem of presence.” That is, how are Jesus and the biblical events of the past made present to these travelers? By voluntarily undertaking a “trip of a lifetime” (as many of her informants call it) to quite literally “walk where Jesus walked,” pilgrims are confronted with existential and ontological questions triggered by comparing their present experiences and future objectives with an idealized, imagined religious past. They therefore must work to resolve these issues. **Traveling abroad and experiencing Otherness** forces them to take stock of their lives at home; confronting other Christian denominations and religions (from Messianic Jews and Arab Christians to Jewish Israelis and Muslim Palestinians) obliges them to rethink taken-for-granted assumptions about religious pluralism. Moreover, encountering the directives of the tour’s spiritual leaders with their desire to take photographs and purchase souvenirs compels them to negotiate their notions of duty, kinship, age and gender. Indeed, these latter elements are central to Kaell’s analysis: a vast majority of these pilgrims are retired women (“middle-old,” they say), who frequently make sense of their actions by

drawing on common gender stereotypes: that women are more spiritual than men, more inclined to shop, and bear a larger burden for transmitting religious faith to their family.

The problem of presence has its roots long before the pilgrim decides to go on the journey, and stems from the early cultivation of biblical “place consciousness” among these travelers. While Catholicism largely acknowledges the hyper-presence of the Divine in sacred materiality such as churches, tombs, historical places and relics—and thus the need for travel to tangibly interact with them—Protestantism generally has turned a skeptical eye to such voyages. Such teaching is rooted in Martin Luther’s rejection of [pilgrimage as a seductive diversion away from God](#), who does not reside in specific places as pagans (and Catholics) might believe, but is everywhere and everywhere accessible. Yet at least half of American religious visitors to the Holy Land are Evangelical Protestants; how does one account for this? This is particularly a problem, Kaell rightly points out, because researchers often overlook Protestant pilgrimage (since Protestant travelers, like hers, often do not like to use the term “pilgrimage” to describe their actions). Whether they recall it or not, all of these pilgrims have cultivated particular imaginaries of the Holy Land from images in the media, discussions with friends and family, sermons at church services, reading the Bible, and learning about the Holy Land in Sunday school as children. Indeed, Kaell points out that the atlases and heavily curated photographs utilized in Sunday school were created to provide historical grounding to Bible studies, so that moral truths could be made manifest and interpreted. For Protestants in particular, these media also may have been employed to lend credence to alternative spaces in the Holy Land, which, like the Garden Tomb, were created to contest the gaudiness and hegemony of places like the Church of the Holy Sepulcher that were claimed, built, and operated by the Catholic and Orthodox Churches. While her informants rarely remembered the specifics of their Sunday school instruction, they would comment on how it led to a desire to journey to the destination.

However, when they arrive, Protestant pilgrims are often unimpressed and left spiritually empty when visiting the dark and heavily gilded churches that mark biblical sites. Evangelical travelers often commented that they were either akin to pagan temples that are completely foreign to them, or needless interventions that obfuscate the authentic topography of the area. Most Evangelical leaders would try to temper these sentiments, pointing out that the churches served to mark out and preserve these heritage sites. But modern interventions such as blaring music, beeping car horns, and ringing cell-phones further disrupted their idealized imaginaries. Most Evangelical

pilgrims, therefore, preferred to retreat atop mountainous belvederes for sweeping vistas of the land that both reaffirmed the cartographic gaze promoted to them as youths, as well as minimized (if not erased) the gaudy, modern, or problematically un-Protestant elements in the Holy Land. Everything looks biblical from that perspective, Kaell tells us.

These problematic elements notably included Others, with whom both Catholics and Evangelicals had ambiguous relationships. Kaell links the boom in American Catholic and Protestant pilgrimages to the Middle East to changing sentiments towards Jews and Arabs in the 1960s. In particular, Vatican II, which radically reformulated the Catholic Church, absolved the Jewish people of deicide (which, in pre-conciliar teachings, implicitly affirmed their diasporic destiny), and therefore allowed Catholics to accept Jewish claims to Israel. This, in turn, shifted the way Christians integrated the Jewish people into their cosmology; aided by images of Western Israelis, they were seen as fundamentally linked to U.S. Christians. If the modern Jewish Israeli was perceived to be the religio-cultural essence of the equally modern American Christian, then the stereotypically un-modern Palestinian Arab—often portrayed in period photos as poverty-stricken, in tattered clothes, working the land or haggling in bazaars—was seen as a biblical prototype, a historical remnant of Jesus’ age in the present. In Palestinians, pilgrims expected to witness life as Jesus lived it two millennia ago, but were frustrated by encountering post-Intifada Arabs who were modernized, part of a military conflict, and majority Muslim. While listening to Hebrew prayers transported pilgrims to the time of Jesus, hearing the Islamic *muezzin* project his call to worship from mosques’ minarets five times a day pulled them from this same imaginary experience. Pamela, an Evangelical pilgrim, recalled being awoken by “this awful noise like a giant bee” that she recognized as the call for prayer, and thought, “My goodness, this should never be! You never heard that during Jesus and the Apostles’ time.”

Another tension is one familiar to pilgrimage and tourism scholars, that of the role that commerce plays versus spirituality. Pilgrimage, [as I have elsewhere discussed](#), is an “oppositional category” invoked by scholars and practitioners alike against mainstream, modern, ludic, capitalistic forms of mobility. It is historically supposed to be difficult, penitential, out-of-the-ordinary, a time of contemplation and of *communitas*—a spontaneous sensation of unity amongst all who partake in the journey. Yet the reality of pilgrimage is that it is embedded in social politics, contestation, and commercialism. This is particularly the case in Kaell’s study. Rather than following individual pilgrims and backpackers, Kaell specifically traveled in group tours, pilgrimages sponsored by parishes or religious groups, and organized by commercial tour

operators. Such trips are often quite expensive; travelers stay in high-standard hotels rather than in pilgrim hostels, are brought by their guides to restaurants and souvenir stands catering to mass-market tourists, and, whether they know it or not, pay for their study leaders' expenses. Although beyond the scope of this book, it would have been interesting for Kaell to either diversify the pilgrim groups she examined, or devote more attention to the mechanisms at work at the practitioners' end, as [Jackie Feldman has recently done in his autoethnographic account, *A Jewish Guide in the Holy Land*](#). Nevertheless, Kaell provides context through an illuminating overview of the development of the tourism industry in the Holy Land. She also reveals the everyday politics and power struggles at work between these pilgrims and local goods and service providers. In particular, she points out the contradiction that, although American travelers hold economic power, they are often frustrated by the power locals seemingly possess in their bartering acumen. Despite their participation in the commerce of tourism, pilgrims are loathe to associate themselves with tourists, although the events that precipitate pejorative commentary on the Holy Land's commercialism varies with each group. One example is the predominantly Evangelical practice of mass (re-)baptism in the Jordan River; Catholics view the crush of foreigners in the water as a sort of commercialized pseudo-event, likening the experience to Disneyland. Likewise, Protestants often comment negatively on the masses of Catholics, Arab Christians, and tourists inside monumental churches, which in a similar vein are perceived as cheapening the sacredness and solemnity of the site; one Evangelical pilgrim felt it reveals the Church's hegemony and secular marketing acumen. Paradoxically, he continued by saying, "If this were my country, I'd never let these churches come in and take it [the holy site]. I'd take those sites and develop them ... [with] hotels, restaurants. They should look to Walt Disney to see how to market things properly." For him, [this paragon of American commercialism](#) represents orderliness, cleanliness, and even morality.

So how do these places become meaningful? When is this problem of presence, or expectations gap, mitigated? Kaell categorizes places that provide successful spiritual experiences into two overlapping types: "home places"—sites that live up to the pilgrim's expectations or resemble their sites of worship at home—and sites that make manifest their familiar "home religion." For the latter, these are places associated with stories or songs from home, such as the Jordan River, which several of her Protestant informants acknowledged seemed a bit commercial, but, as one enthusiastically stated, "all that stuff faded away and you could just think, 'this is the *Jordan River!* This is it!'" Song, Kaell points out, is particularly powerful for both evoking this sense of sacredness and in counteracting unsatisfying elements of the site,

and pilgrims often coupled their journeys by singing religious songs such as “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” or popular melodies that they believed were traditional Jewish tunes, but were often either recent inventions or written by Protestants, such as “If I Were a Rich Man” from Broadway’s *Fiddler on the Roof*. But Kaell is quick to break with the [findings of anthropologist Glenn Bowman](#), who argued that a site’s sacrality is felt when it conforms to these expectations; on the contrary, she found that serendipity plays a more powerful role. That is, the site is meaningful when it is *like* something familiar (and thus comprehensible) to the traveler, but also when she is struck with a sudden and unexpected sensation in experiencing it. Her analysis reminds me of [James Elkins’ book *Pictures and Tears*](#), which demonstrates that visitors’ emotional responses to paintings in museums (the Stendhal Syndrome) stems from experiences of either resonance or wonder: either the painting evokes in the viewer the complex, dynamic cultural forces in which it is perceived to stand, or it provides an unexpected and arresting sense of uniqueness that stops them in their tracks.

This leads to a second major contradiction associated with the problem of presence: these pilgrims go abroad to reinforce individual and collective identities at home. Kaell emphasizes that although these pilgrims avail themselves of global infrastructures and participate in a lucrative global industry, they are by no means necessarily “global citizens,” nor do they think of themselves in that way. Indeed, though many are quite cognizant of the basic geopolitical dangers in the Middle East (and justify their trip to family and friends by minimizing their fears of death), the real dangers they encounter are the fears of disillusionment, disappointment, and disorientation of their idealized vision of what the pilgrimage is supposed to be, which they have for so long entertained in their imagination. Consequently, they make meaning of the political conflicts through their own religio-cultural lens. For example, they often liken crossing the border from modern Israel to impoverished Palestine to that of the U.S.-Mexican border. Because they do not have a firm grasp of the region’s history or geopolitics, they often frame the struggles in Christian or biblical terms: Seeing Jews as a religiously persecuted people, they do not understand why Israelis would then persecute Arabs; Muslims are even more incomprehensible; and they perceive Arab Christians as living symbols of Christological suffering. When local tour guides provide uncomfortable political commentary, they also revert to what Kaell interprets as gendered responses: males tend to enjoy discussing the minutiae of the political situation while women and (male) religious leaders attempt to steer the conversation to more spiritual matters.

Finally, this brings us to a third contradiction: Kaell's pilgrims are moved to travel by personal, interior motivations that are nevertheless made publically manifest through their participation in the pilgrimage itself, as well as their performances at home once the trip is over. Kaell includes a number of touching stories from pilgrims concerning personal issues at home that compelled them to undertake this physically and economically taxing journey. For some, it is a time of soul searching or of re-centering themselves, particularly after family members' deaths. One informant, who recently lost both her parents and her husband, traveled in the hope of understanding whether she was ok. Others travel to integrate themselves into a faith community, while still others see it as an escape from the pressures and burdens of everyday life. One woman with whom Kaell became close went on the trip to resolve marital issues, while another traveled because that is what a beloved family member would have wanted her to do. As with the [Catholic pilgrims I study in Italy](#), some travel to request divine intervention in the form of a grace, while others go in thanksgiving for a grace received. In the end, many thought of their pilgrimage as an "interior journey," a way of growing in personal faith.

But despite the great variety of motivations that are often kept private, pilgrimage is very much a performance; it is a public show of religious devotion—to other pilgrims on their trip, to family and friends at home, to the Divine itself. It is, in a word, social. And with sociality comes the burden of transcending social divisions such as class, gender and geographic differences in idealized pilgrimages. These tensions innately bubble up, and Kaell reveals various ways tour leaders and pilgrims attempt to mitigate these conflicts through deflection, re-centering discourses, or reminding them of the spiritual nature of the pilgrimage. Yet despite conflicts, when travelers return home these difficulties often fade away in their memories. Travelers sometimes even cultivate relationships with former group members, exchanging frequent emails and Christmas cards, though they may not have been overly friendly with each other during the trip itself. The opposite also occurred: upon their return, some cut contact with friends from the group altogether. Kaell interprets these opposing responses as stemming from the same logic: pilgrims recollect the group as a collective entity that reflects their particular goals.

Indeed, these performances thus do not end once the pilgrims return home. On the contrary, it is here that tensions most pointedly emerge as the travelers attempt to articulate and make meaning of oft-inexpressible sensations and remembered experiences from the Holy Land. One of the book's strengths is Kaell's attention to the effects of pilgrimage after the

journey is complete. With the notable exception of [Nancy Frey's *Pilgrim Stories: On and Off the Road to Santiago*](#), Kaell's book is a rarity in pilgrimage and tourism studies for her research method of conducting in-home follow-up interviews with travelers, sometimes years after the trip had concluded. Since the pilgrimage is often undertaken by women unaccompanied by other family members, pilgrims feel the burden of performing and justifying the outcomes of their trip. They do this through storytelling, aided by photographic images; over time, both the stories and the photos are edited, re-organized, and re-framed—revealing that memory, and memorializing mechanisms, are processual. They often curate their own shrines and mantles with objects brought back from the Holy Land, which include photos, touristy souvenirs, and “found objects” such as stones, dirt and pressed leaves, which serve a metonymic function (it is a piece of the sacred site inside the home). But most importantly, they give gifts to others. While often these travelers comment that they could purchase similar objects for less money at home, gifting is an important performance because it demonstrates that the recipient was thought about during the journey. It is also a way for the pilgrim to extend her experience, since it provides yet another opportunity to relive and retell the events. Furthermore, it is often desired that the gift will inspire the recipient to be closer to God; it is hoped that by gazing at it, they will recall the journey their family member made, and the transcendent experiences that were recounted to them.

In all of these cases, the performances upon the return home offer the pilgrims a chance to remake themselves—at least temporarily, since family members might resist this act of self-refashioning. One informant discussed how she was emboldened to provide authoritative commentary on biblical and religious issues; this made her sister, a former nun, quite upset at the usurping of her role as the “religious one” in the household. Gradually, as time went on, this pilgrim pulled back on her commentary. The stories became more general and less frequent, photos were culled, and she seemed to return to her original status within the family. Another pilgrim told Kaell about all of the illnesses that befell her, an outcome that was quite contrary to what she had expected. And the informant with marital problems continued to have issues with her husband. Life seems to gradually return to normal. However, these pilgrims nevertheless confided that they felt some transformations on the inside, insofar as the experience will always be present to them. Kaell concludes by pointing out that pilgrimage itself is a process—and one without necessary closure. Though this may have been *the* “trip of a lifetime,” the paragon of extraordinary events, it is not the *only* event in their life; lives are constantly changing, always “in the making.” By taking readers through the entire progression of Holy Land pilgrimage from pre-tour to post, Kaell shows

that religion and religious experience is lived; it is negotiated; it is interpreted and contested and reinterpreted as it is suffused in everyday life. Ultimately, then, it is the pilgrims' extraordinary presence in the Holy Land that they work to understand, make meaningful, and integrate into their lives.

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