TO BE A PILGRIM:
A GEOGRAPHY OF FAITH FOR JEWS, CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS

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INTRODUCTION

At the State Funeral this past April of Baroness Thatcher, the late Prime Minister of the United Kingdom—not my favorite politician, I must admit, if I may be said to have any favorites among British politicians—the congregation sang a hymn that caught my fancy. The hymn said much about the Methodist origins of Margaret Thatcher, even though she died a member of the Church of England. Written by the famous prose writer, John Bunyan, it occurs towards the conclusion of his book, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. Modern English hymn books usually present a bowdlerized version of Bunyan’s original, as in the version sung at Thatcher’s funeral; I much prefer the Puritan vigor of Bunyan’s original lyrics, as exemplified in its first verse:

Who would true Valour see  
Let him come hither;  
One here will Constant be,  
Come Wind, come Weather.  
There’s no Discouragement,  
Shall make him once Relent  
His first avow’d Intent  
To be a Pilgrim.¹

An African Muslim friend of mine over the past forty-six years stayed with me a few months ago at Fordham. One morning, as he was preparing his breakfast, I suddenly realized that he was whistling that hymn.

“Where did you learn that?” I inquired.

“We used to sing it in primary school back in the colonial days,” he admitted, and we laughed. “It’s a pity,” he went on, “but nowadays the children don’t learn any hymns in school.” I am sure that is true in the public schools of his home country, a nation more than 90% Muslim.

As I thought over my friend’s fond recollection of learning Bunyan’s hymn as a child, it also struck me that the hymn is surprisingly interreligious, if you wish, although Bunyan might have been horrified to discover this. At the heart of the Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions of faith, pilgrimage plays an enormous role. Each tradition has a sense that at its core lies a journey that all must undertake if they are to reach the destination of life. Pilgrimage is not the same in each tradition, but in many ways all three faith traditions map their visions of the world in what I characterize as a geography of faith, largely as a result of their pilgrimage traditions.

I: ALIYAH: PILGRIM ASCENT TO MOUNT ZION

The desire of Jews to go on pilgrimage (*aliyah*) to the Holy Land, and especially to Jerusalem—to ascend to Zion, to translate the Hebrew expression literally—derives from
legislation in the Torah. In the Book of Exodus, the people of Israel are commanded to worship God at regular intervals: “Three times a year you shall hold a festival for me” (Ex 23:14). The word for ‘festival’ in this context is *chag*, the cognate in Hebrew of the Arabic word *hajj*, and it suggests a pilgrimage as well as going around in a circle. Psalm 48 seems to refer to such ritual circumambulation: “Walk around Zion / circle it; count its towers” (Ps 48:13). All of the psalms between Psalm 120 and 134 are prefaced with the note that each is “a song of ascents.” Psalm 122 begins with words placed in the mouth of a pilgrim to Jerusalem and its Temple: “I rejoiced when they said to me, ‘We are going to the house of the Lord’” (Ps 122:1).

The times of those three festivals mandated in the Book of Exodus were connected with stages of the agricultural cycle: the Feast of Passover (*Pesach*) or Unleavened Bread, at the time of planting; the Feast of Weeks or First-Fruits (*Shavuoth*), occurring when the first grains can be harvested; and the Feast of Tabernacles (*Sukkoth*), associated with the completion of the harvest. The Book of Exodus does not specify where these feasts are to be held, saying only that “three times a year all your males shall appear before the Sovereign, the LORD” (Ex 23:17). The Book of Deuteronomy, however, a document of the seventh century BCE—several centuries after King David’s centering of the united Israelite kingdom and its worship on Jerusalem—insists on the unity of Israelite cultus, implicitly at Jerusalem, referred to anonymously as “the site where the LORD your God will choose amidst all your tribes as His habitation, to establish His name there” (Deut 12:5). When Solomon consecrated the Temple in Jerusalem in the tenth century BCE, he insisted that everyone, even Gentiles attracted to the faith of Israel, should ever afterwards utter their prayers while facing in the direction of the Jerusalem Temple: “[I]f a foreigner who is not of Your people Israel comes from a distant land for the sake of Your name . . . when he comes to pray towards this House, oh, hear in Your heavenly abode and grant all the foreigner asks You for. Thus all the peoples of the earth will know Your name and revere You, as does Your people Israel; and they will recognize that Your name is attached to this House that I have built” (1 Kings 8:41-43).

The Jerusalem-centeredness of faith in the Israelite and, eventually, the Jewish tradition, raises some questions about people who trace their origins as a people to the call of Abraham and his immediate descendants, Isaac and Jacob, ancestors in faith much anterior to the era of David and Solomon. Each of the earliest patriarchs is identified with particular sacred places where they worshiped God, many of them quite far from Jerusalem. Abraham, for instance, built an altar to worship God at Shechem (Gen 12:6), where he originally entered the Land of Promise. Abraham built alters at several other locales as well: between Bethel and Ai (Gen 12:8), at Hebron (Gen 13:8), at Beer-sheba (Gen 21:33) and finally at Moriah (Gen 22:14). Isaac also worshiped God at Beer-sheba (Gen 26:23-25), and Jacob, more famously, at Bethel (Gen 28:18-19; 35:1-3).

Later Israelite tradition identified Moriah, where Abraham had been willing to sacrifice his son Isaac, with the site of the Temple in Jerusalem (2 Chr 3:1), although this geographical reference is not entirely explicit in Scripture. The Book of Genesis also manages symbolically to identify Abraham’s worship of God with Jerusalem by arranging an encounter between the patriarch and the mysterious priest-king of Salem, Melchizedek, who blesses Abram in the name of “God Most High” (Gen 14:19). One possible translation of Psalm 110 considers the incumbent Davidic-descended ruler in Jerusalem as the heir of Melchizedek (Ps 110:4). Abram pays to Melchizedek (Gen 14:20) the tithe later identified in Israelite tradition as the tax for the
support of Jerusalem Temple officiants (Num 18:31). The unity of Israelite faith assured by the centering of the cultus on Jerusalem in the era of David and Solomon broke down with the collapse of the united monarchy after Solomon’s death. Almost immediately, Jeroboam, the first ruler of the Northern Kingdom, realized that the continuation of worship of the LORD at Jerusalem would undermine his throne. Thus he instituted or re instituted worship of the LORD at Dan and Bethel, at the northern and southern ends of his kingdom. The Jerusalem-centered account of this Northern Kingdom worship refuses to recognize the worship at these shrines as anything but idolatry of the worst sort, adoration of a golden calf (1 Kings 12:25-33). We have no alternate theological or historical narrative from a Northern Kingdom perspective that might contradict this accusation. In the eighth century BCE the Southern Kingdom prophet Amos made his way north and excoriated the worship at Bethel and other shrines outside Jerusalem’s control (Am 5:5). Amaziah, the priest at Bethel and a loyalist of the Northern Kingdom’s ruler, Jeroboam II, reacted vehemently to the preaching of Amos. “Seer, off with you to the land of Judah! . . . Don’t ever prophesy again at Bethel; for it is a king’s sanctuary and a royal palace” (Am 7:12-13).

The experience of exile entered into the lives of the people of the Northern Kingdom in the late eighth century BCE, and into the lives of the people in the Southern Kingdom in the early sixth century BCE. Neither Northern Kingdom shrines nor the Southern Kingdom Temple at Jerusalem survived as centers of worship. The Book of Daniel, nevertheless, portrays its eponymous hero as one who refused, even in Persia, to submit to the public cultus of the divinized King in that place of exile. Instead, in the privacy of his room Daniel prayed to the God of Israel alone, and he prayed with a precise geographical orientation: “He had had windows made facing Jerusalem, and three times a day he knelt down, prayed, and made confession to his God, as he had always done” (Dan 6:11). After the Babylonian Exile, the Jews built the Second Temple in Jerusalem at the urging of prophets like Haggai (Hag 1:1-11). In the last century BCE the Judean-Idumaean king, Herod the Great, undertook a massive rebuilding of that Second Temple to please his Jewish subjects, but the project was only completed a few short years before the Zealot uprising which resulted in the Roman destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE. Jews resumed the Babylonian Exile tradition of prayer facing Jerusalem and its one God, especially after the Romans forbade access to Jerusalem for Jews in the aftermath of the Bar Kokhba Revolt (132-135 CE). Even if Jews have been acculturated in many different social and educational backgrounds over the centuries, especially after the diaspora effected by the Romans, they have continued to turn to God in the direction of the hill of Zion in Jerusalem where the Temple once stood.

No Jew of the later centuries exemplified this prayerful geographical orientation better than the scholar and poet of eleventh- and twelfth-century Spain, Judah Halevi. His social and educational background had profoundly immersed Halevi in the Muslim culture of Spain, but his inner life as a Jew—and especially as a Levite (ha-Levi)—oriented him to the Land of Israel and the hill of Zion in Jerusalem, once the Temple site. Halevi’s most famous prose work in Arabic, The Kuzari (Kitab al-Khazari, “The Book of the Khazar”) purports to be the record of an extensive conversation between a Jewish scholar and the king of the Khazars, an ethnic group of southwestern Asia who had tented in what is now the Caucasus. Some of the Khazar nobility converted to Judaism in the eighth century CE, but Halevi’s king is a creation of the writer’s imagination in twelfth-century Spain. According to Halevi, the superiority of revealed knowledge of God over philosophical knowledge of God corresponded also with the superiority
of the Jewish religious tradition over other traditions. That superiority also attached to the Jewish homeland, which Halevi always referred to as al-Sham, the normal Arabic world for the whole area of today’s Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian territories. In this geographical and theological centeredness (not to say ethnocentrism), Halevi continues the tradition of many other ancient and medieval writers, Hellenistic, Christian and Muslim, who constructed geographies of various climes proving that one or another homeland provided the world with its true center. One thinks in this connection of the famous 1976 cover drawing by Saul Steinberg for The New Yorker portraying a true New Yorker’s map of the world as seen from Ninth Avenue.

At the end of his life Halevi left Spain for the Land of Promise, dying shortly after his arrival there. Halevi’s most famous poem, his “Ode to Zion,” is used in the annual Jewish commemoration of the Ninth of Av, the day in the Jewish calendar that commemorates the destruction of both the First and the Second Temples. It looks forward to what would be Halevi’s pilgrimage at the end of his life. I will quote excerpts from Raymond Scheindlin’s fine English rendering: “Jerusalem! Have you no greeting / for your captive hearts, your last remaining flocks, / who send you messages of love? / Here are greetings for you from west and east, / from north and south, from near and far, from every side— / greetings also from a certain man, / a captive of your love.” Although the poem addresses itself to Zion, the poet cites various places of encounter between God and the patriarch Jacob that are unconnected with Jerusalem: “My heart is aching for Beth-el, Peniel, Mahanayim, / every place where saints met messengers from God.” Halevi’s Zion is much larger than Jerusalem and the Temple Mount; it encompasses every place in the Land of Promise where Israelites of old encountered the reality of the LORD God dwelling in their midst, what has been called the Shekhina. Halevi describes in an almost folksy manner the goal of his pilgrimage as to arrive at the place “where the Shekhina is your neighbor.” It is God dwelling among his people, the Shekhina, that consecrates not only Mount Zion but all of Israel.

We know very little about how Judah Halevi ended his days, except that his death apparently occurred shortly after his arrival in the Holy Land in 1141 CE. What we do know is that Judah Halevi, the descendant of Levites who had once served in the Temple, was finally able to follow in their footsteps. At the end of his life he found it possible to pray not only in the direction of Jerusalem, but right there. “God chose to dwell in you [Zion]/,” Halevi wrote, “and happy is the man He chooses to bring near/ to make his home within your courts.” That centeredness on Mount Zion, Jerusalem and the Land of Promise continues in the faith tradition of Jews to the present day. Zionism bears a family resemblance to many other nationalistic traditions of the late nineteenth century, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, but the Jewish theological orientation to Jerusalem and to the hill of Zion—and especially, the Jewish tradition of pilgrimage (aliyah)—makes it unique, although not every Israeli or every Jew recognizes this.

II. DECENTERED, BUT CHRISTOCENTRIC PILGRIMAGE

Jesus as LORD and Messiah stands at the center of the Christian faith tradition, and therefore at the center of Christian pilgrimage. This holds true even for those Christian pilgrimages that seek out shrines commemorating localized visions of the Virgin Mary, such as Lourdes, Fatima, Częstochowa and Knock, or the tombs of martyred saints like Peter and Paul in Rome, James the Greater at Compostela, and Thomas Becket at Canterbury. When Jesus Christ is not at the center of any Christian pilgrimage, it too easily degenerates into a cult surrounding
dubious visionaries. The altar where the Eucharist is celebrated at a pilgrimage shrine often stands over or near the tomb where the martyred saint is buried, or very close to the locale where the visionary experienced the presence of the Virgin Mary.

Although there are many Christian pilgrimage sites in Jerusalem and the Holy Land more generally, for more than a millennium and a half the road of Christian pilgrims coming from outside the Holy Land has led not to Mount Zion, the goal of Jewish pilgrimage, but slightly off center, as it were, to the nearby Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, which commemorates both the death and the resurrection of Jesus. Christian pilgrims to the Holy Land have also sought out the holy places commemorating the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem and his ascension from the Mount of Olives. Only the soldiers of the First Crusade, after enacting a brutal pogrom against the Jews of the Rhineland in 1096, directed their marauding and murderous path towards Mount Zion. On arrival in Jerusalem in 1099 they slaughtered many, and possibly most of the Muslims and Jews living there, profaning with their blood the Muslim site called the Noble Sanctuary (Haram al-Sharif), the place where the Jerusalem Temple had once stood.

For Jesus himself, however, *aliyah* or ascent to Mount Zion in Jerusalem played an important role during his lifetime. But after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 CE, Christians of Jewish origin no longer focused their lives of prayer on Mount Zion in the same way that Jesus had, or that Jews in the diaspora from the late first century CE continued to do. This historical fact may be taken as one aspect of the melancholy history of separation of Christianity from its Jewish roots; it also points to the great difference that Jesus introduces into the monotheism inherited from Israel.

Luke’s Gospel depicts Jesus as a man on a journey, in some sense a pilgrimage, to Jerusalem. “When the days drew near for him to be taken up,” Luke writes, “he set his face to go to Jerusalem” (Lk 9:51). At the conclusion of Luke’s Gospel, Jesus leaves Jerusalem by ascending into heaven from Bethany on the Mount of Olives (Lk 24:50-51). The Infancy Narrative of Luke, a highly symbolic presentation of the significance of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus worked out in the account of his earliest years, brings Jesus to Jerusalem twice: the first time to be presented as an offering to God in the Temple and redeemed by his parents (Lk 2:22-39), and the second time as a pre-adolescent pilgrim who ascends to Jerusalem with his parents for Passover. Luke narrates in this context how Jesus was separated from his parents in Jerusalem for a period of three days and then reunited with them in the Temple, symbolically presaging his death in Jerusalem and his resurrection after three days (Lk 2:41-52).

John’s Gospel more realistically portrays Jesus as making at least three canonical pilgrimages to Jerusalem. The first and the last of these canonical ascents to Jerusalem take place at Passover at the beginning of the public career of Jesus and at its conclusion. In his account of the first Passover pilgrimage of Jesus, John describes the uproar Jesus caused when he drove the sellers of animals for sacrifices and the changers of profane coinage into Temple shekels out of the Court of the Gentiles (Jn 2:13-22). The other three evangelists (Mk 11:15-18; Mt 21:12-13; Lk 19:45-46) narrate this event as something of a prelude to the final conflict between Jesus and the Temple authorities: “Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations? But you have made it a den of robbers’” (Mk 11:17).
John’s Gospel places the cleansing of the Temple at the beginning of his narrative, depicting it as an event of even greater symbolic and theological importance: “‘Destroy this temple,’” Jesus says in John’s Gospel, “‘and in three days I will raise it up.’” (Jn 2:19). John assures us that Jesus was not speaking literally about the Second Temple, but figuratively about “the temple of his body,” maintaining that “after [Jesus] was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken” (Jn 2:21-22).

On his final Passover pilgrimage to Jerusalem, Jesus, according to John’s Gospel, is put on trial before Priestly and Roman authorities. John’s Pharisees and Priests fear that the work of Jesus might provoke the Romans to “destroy both our holy place and our nation” (Jn 11:47-48). The Gospels of Mark and Matthew recall among the accusations leveled against Jesus a very literal interpretation of his words that he would “destroy this temple that is made with hands, and . . . build another, not made with hands” (Mk 14:58; see also Mt 26:61). The Gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke all agree that a certain symbolic destruction of the Temple occurred at the time of the death of Jesus, the tearing of the veil that separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the Temple (Mk 15:38; Mt 27:51; Lk 23:45). The Gospel writers, composing their written accounts of Jesus after 70 CE, saw in that tearing of the veil a hint of the disaster that had eventually befallen the Temple.

In between the two Passover pilgrimages to Jerusalem in John’s Gospel, Jesus visits the Temple for the Feast of Tabernacles (Sukkoth). He figuratively presents himself on the last day of that festival as the fulfillment of, or even replacement for, some of the central symbolic elements of Sukkoth. When water from the fountain of Gihon is poured out in the Temple by the High Priest “on the last day of the festival, the great day,” Jesus symbolically associates that water with himself: “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink” (Jn 7:37-38). Likewise, when four enormous golden candlesticks are lit in the Court of the Women on the first night of Sukkoth, illuminating much of Jerusalem, Jesus claims the image for himself: “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life” (Jn 8:12). A similar claim to replacement or even abolition of aspects of the Temple worship at Jerusalem comes up in the account in John’s Gospel of the meeting between Jesus and a Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well, near Mount Gerizim, where the Samaritans centered their ritual lives. Jesus relativizes all sacred geography in that dialogue, telling his Samaritan interlocutor that “the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem” (Jn 4:21). It is no wonder, then, that some Judeans accused Jesus of being a Samaritan and possessed by the devil (Jn 8:48).

For all the hints at the future destruction of the Second Temple in the four Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles depicts the first Jerusalem Christians as people who still feel at home in the Temple (Acts 2:46). Preaching the message of Jesus and performing a miraculous healing in that sacred setting bring the disciples into conflict with the Temple authorities (Acts 3:1-4:31), but the disciples still continue “every day in the temple and at home . . . to teach and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah” (Acts 5:42). A break with the Temple cultus, however, begins among some of the Greek-speaking members of the Jerusalem Christian community. Stephen, one of the seven Hellenist Jews who served his fellow Greek-speaking Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, is accused by his critics of “saying things against this holy place and the law” (Acts 6:13). In the tradition of Jeremiah, Stephen also relativizes the importance of the Temple: “[T]he Most High does not

Even before the Western Roman emperor, Constantine I, issued the Edict of Milan in 313 CE, making Christianity licit throughout his domain, Christians had begun to undertake pilgrimage or at least visits to the places where Jesus had lived and died and risen. Eusebius of Caesarea makes much of the pilgrimage undertaken in the fourth century by his imperial patron, Constantine, and his redoubtable mother, Helena. To Constantine we owe the location of the place in Jerusalem where Jesus had died, was buried and rose again, now the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Helena is said to have built the original Basilica of the Nativity in Bethlehem and an oratory on the Mount of Olives, marking the locale where the disciples witnessed the ascension of Jesus. Those three locations may be taken as symbolic of the difference between Jewish aliyah leading to the Jerusalem Temple or its ruins and Christ-centered pilgrimage focused on the whole mystery of the Incarnation. That seemingly small but deeply significant decentering of pilgrimage, away from the Temple Mount and towards Golgotha, Bethlehem and the Mount of Olives, reorganized the geography of faith for Christians.

In the same century Cyril, Bishop of Jerusalem, describes how the baptism of neophytes in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre orients them quite literally, directs them towards the east. In the outer chamber of the Church the neophytes first faced west—the direction of Egypt, the land of darkness and of bondage—to renounce their sins. Then they faced towards the rising sun. Entering the Church they stripped off their clothes and were led by the hand towards “the sacred pool of divine Baptism, as Christ passed from the cross to the Sepulchre you see before you.” The geographical directedness of those neophytes in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in fourth-century Jerusalem may be taken as an early example in Christian liturgy undertaken ad orientem, facing the east.

Such eastward directedness has proven theologically and liturgically controversial in the last two centuries, especially in Anglican and Catholic circles, where the orientation of church buildings, altars, celebrants and congregations has been debated. The Pope emeritus, Benedict XVI, published a book on liturgy while he was still Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, in which he argued that for early Christians “the east supersedes the Jerusalem temple as a symbol.” He goes on to note that “[w]e cannot date exactly when this turn to the east, the diverting of the gaze from the Temple, took place, but it is certain that it goes back to the earliest times and was always regarded as an essential characteristic of Christian liturgy (and indeed of private prayer).” It should be noted, in passing, that most churches in Manhattan and the Bronx, at least, follow the city’s grid and are placed geographically on a north-south axis, facing either north or south. Saint Patrick’s Cathedral and the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine, however, face eastwards.

The seventh-century conquest of Jerusalem by the armies of ‘Umar, the second caliph in succession to Muhammad, started devotional pilgrimage by Muslims to the long abandoned site of Mount Zion, believed in Islamic tradition to be the location of “the furthest place of worship” (al-Masjid al-Aqsa’) to which Muhammad had traveled by night (Qur’an 17:1). Although Romans, pagan and later Byzantine Christian, had barred Jews from access to Jerusalem and the Temple Mount, the Umayyad Muslim rulers of Syria originally welcomed both Jews and Christians to visit their own holy places under Muslim sway. Orthodox Jews, however, prefer
to pray at the Western Wall of the Temple today rather than on the platform that was once the site of the actual Temple, and especially the Holy of Holies.\(^{25}\)

When, four centuries after the Muslim conquest of Jerusalem, Christian access to their own holy places in Jerusalem became difficult under later and more antagonistic Muslim regimes, this difficulty—as well as the perilous decline of the Eastern Christian Roman Empire—provided motives for starting what have come to be called the Crusades.\(^ {26}\) But the earliest Crusaders defined what they were doing as \textit{peregrinatio}. Usually translated as ‘pilgrimage,’ the word \textit{peregrinatio} more literally means ‘foreignness,’ and it was thought of as penitential exile for sin,\(^ {27}\) even if the Crusader pilgrims too often fell into more grievous sin on their journeys towards the Holy Land, as noted earlier with regard to the First Crusade.

A penitent pilgrim of the sixteenth century, Iñigo López de Loyola—better known today as Ignatius Loyola—found a new orientation for his life in 1523 when he traveled to the east as a pilgrim. On the eve of his scheduled departure, after three weeks spent in Jerusalem, Ignatius gave in to “a great desire to go back and visit the Mount of Olives again before he left.”\(^ {28}\) In his brief \textit{Autobiography} he mentions no other holy place in Jerusalem. What was Ignatius looking for on the Mount of Olives at the Muslim shrine that had once been the oratory built by Helena? Markings on a stone in the floor of the shrine were said to be the footprints Jesus left behind. It is more probable that they derive from too literal an understanding by Christians of a verse from an apocalyptic vision of the \textit{LORD} in the Book of Zechariah: “On that day, He will set His feet on the Mount of Olives, near Jerusalem on the east” (Zech 14:4).

In any case, Ignatius slipped away from his fellow pilgrims and their Ottoman guides that final day of his pilgrimage and went off alone to the Mount of Olives. The sentries did not want to let him enter, but Ignatius paid the entry fee, not once but twice. He gave them his pen knife the first time, and his scissors the second time, when he wanted to revisit the spot shortly afterwards because “he hadn’t taken a proper look at where the right foot was or where the left was.”\(^ {29}\) When the Franciscans discovered that their Basque pilgrim had gone missing, they sent one of their servants to retrieve him. That servant marched Ignatius back under arrest to the Franciscan Custody in what would today be called a ‘perp walk.’ Ignatius endured this humiliation with patience, feeling that “he was seeing Christ always over him.”\(^ {30}\) His life’s Christocentric pilgrimage was not to end finally in Jerusalem but in Rome. Ignatius remained, to the close of his days, “the pilgrim,” the term he used for himself in his \textit{Autobiography}. It would no longer matter to him where the right foot and the left foot of Jesus were planted on the Mount of Olives. Ignatius had placed his own feet firmly on the pilgrim road that leads to the presence of God.

III. THE \textit{HAJJ}: IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF ABRAHAM

The pilgrimage (\textit{hajj}) to the places in the Arabian Peninsula that Muslims associate with Abraham plays a more central role in the practice of Islam than does pilgrimage in either the post-biblical tradition of Jews or the tradition of Christians at any period. One of the five pillars (\textit{arkan}) of Islam, the \textit{hajj} nevertheless remains not quite so rigorously required of all Muslims as are the other four pillars.\(^ {31}\) Problems in financing the \textit{hajj}—or performing it at times of civil unrest on the roads to or within Arabia—could excuse a faithful Muslim from undertaking the fulfillment of this pillar of Islam. Every Muslim I have ever known in Africa, at least, wishes to undertake this sacred journey at least once in his or her lifetime. Some undertake it more often.
Although there are other local or sectarian pilgrimages in Muslim societies, the hajj uniquely provides all Muslims, Sunni or Shi'i, with their own geography of faith. All Muslims face Mecca in worship five times a day; within Mecca they face the Masjid al-Haram, the Sacred Mosque; within the Sacred Mosque they surround the empty and windowless cubic building at its heart, the Ka’ba, said in some sense to be ‘the House of God.’ The Qur’an is quite specific in reporting God’s words of command regarding this sacred place: “We arranged for the House to be a refuge for humankind and a sanctuary: ‘Take Abraham’s place of worship as yours as well.’ We made a covenant with Abraham and Ishmael: ‘Purify my House for those who circumambulate it, for those who ponder there, for those who bow down there, for those who prostrate themselves there’” (Qur’an 2:125).

Abraham plays some part in Jewish pilgrimage to Mount Zion, especially when later Jewish tradition conflated Mount Moriah in Jerusalem with “the land of Moriah” (Gen 22:2), where Abraham had been called upon to sacrifice his only son. Abraham plays no role at all in Christian orientation in prayer towards the locales of the birth, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. But the patriarch returns to the center of religious attention as Ibrahim in the Muslim pilgrimage. For Muslims, moreover, the stories of Abraham are not connected with the land of Canaan or with a patrilineal inheritance through Isaac. Along with Hagar (Hajar in Arabic), the mother of his first-born son (Isma’il)—the quintessential human scapegoats in the Book of Genesis—the Quranic Abraham meets his God in the desert vastness of Arabia, precisely in the place where the Sacred Mosque now stands in Mecca. The place of Abraham (maqam Ibrahim) is singled out as a small pavilion near the Ka’ba. The hillocks of Safa and Marwa, revered as the places to which the frantic Hagar ran to find water for her baby in the desert, lie today at either end of a colonnaded portico within the precincts of the Sacred Mosque. Muslim tradition, however, maintains that the Ka’ba built by Abraham and Ishmael eventually descended into polytheism, what is called more vividly in Arabic shirk, falsely ascribing partners to God in the divine reality.

God’s command to Abraham and Ishmael to “purify my House” points to the fact that pre-Islamic Arab festivals were celebrated at regular intervals at or near the Ka’ba in Mecca, pilgrimages that only ended when Muhammad and his exiled compatriots finally conquered his native city in 630 CE. The pre-Islamic hajj seems to have been characterized by a somewhat orgiastic quality, with at least some of the pilgrims, and perhaps most of them, circumambulating the Ka’ba in a state of complete nakedness. Poetic competitions accompanied by considerable levy and exorbitant spending also characterized this polytheistic hajj. The mercantile elite of Mecca welcomed strangers to market festivals in certain fixed months of the year, events that featured veneration of multiple divinities enshrined in the Ka’ba. It may be for this reason that, at least until 624, two years after his migration from hostile Mecca to welcoming Yathrib (later, Medina), Muhammad led his valiant band of Meccan and Medinan monotheists in worshiping God while facing northwards towards the unseen Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Absence made the heart grow fonder, however, and after 624 the Muslims in Medina directed their worship towards what is called the second qibla, the direction of Mecca and the Ka’ba, places still distinctly pagan but safely out of sight.

Muhammad’s earliest preaching of God’s oneness and the moral demands that one God made may have been deemed to threaten the polytheistic and mercantile identity of the Ka’ba, and Mecca with it. Two of the briefest and earliest suras that Muhammad received in Mecca,
Surat al-Fil (Qur’an 105: “The Sura of the Elephant”) and Surat Quraysh (Qur’an 106: “The Sura of Quraysh”) assure Muhammad and his earliest listeners that the Ka’ba and the pilgrimage will survive, albeit in a transformed manner, continuing to play a central role in the life of the Quraysh, the Arab tribe to which Muhammad and most of his Meccan disciples and adversaries belonged. The first of these two brief suras sees God’s providence at work in the deliverance of Mecca and the Ka’ba from an Abyssinian army that invaded the Meccan area with an elephant, an event datable to the time of Muhammad’s birth around 570. “Have you not seen what the Lord did with the elephant people? Did He not bring their clever ploy to confusion?” (Qur’an 105:2-3). The following sura continues in the same vein, asserting that God assured this pre-Islamic victory with the aim of “making the Quraysh secure—making them secure by having caravans come both in the winter and the summer” (Qur’an 106:1-2). But there would be a difference in the purified Ka’ba, once its many idols were toppled. It would now be a place of the strictest monotheism, where “they will worship the Lord of this House, who feeds them in their hunger and saves them from fear” (Qur’an 106:3-5). Polytheism would have to go, but the Ka’ba and its pilgrimage would remain, continuing to make Mecca prosperous right down to the present day.

What purpose does the hajj serve in the lives of Muslims? As in many other pilgrimages, there is in the hajj not a little of the penitential, entailing hope for the remission of past sins. From the beginning of their hajj, pilgrims are ritually separated from their ordinary, day-to-day life, including any prideful elements in that life. They enter into ihram (consecrated status) and after making a total ablution (often coming down to a shower) all male pilgrims dress in two unsewn pieces of white cloth that cover the upper and lower parts of the body. This common dress not only separates the male pilgrim from his previous situation as a Muslim of a particular ethnic and national identity, symbolized by distinctive clothing, but it also bonds him with his fellow pilgrims who wear the same uniform. No specific ihram garments are prescribed for women, but a cover-all is generally worn that leaves only the hands and face visible.

Once Muslim pilgrims have entered into ihram, they must abstain from sexual relations and also avoid all quarreling or other bad behavior (Qur’an 2:197), including such otherwise legitimate actions as killing an animal or uprooting a plant, with exceptions made for killing snakes or dangerous insects. A highpoint of the hajj—but not the highest—occurs when the pilgrims, newly arrived in Mecca, undertake seven circumambulations of the Ka’ba and the subsequent sevenfold ritual run between the hillocks of Safa and Marwa in imitation of Hagar. The hajj, however, is dramatically differentiated from the ‘umra, the devotional visit to Mecca outside the pilgrimage season, when on the ninth day of the pilgrimage all pilgrims stand together on Mount ‘Arafat, the “hill of mercy” twenty miles east of Mecca. From midday until dusk, those who stand at ‘Arafat listen to sermons and beg for God’s mercy. The rite of standing (wuquf) on Mount ‘Arafat for that afternoon and early evening brings the pilgrimage to its climax. The theocentrism of Islam and the hajj emerge most eloquently in the often repeated pilgrimage prayer, the talbiya: “Here I am, O God, here I am! You have no associate [in Godhead]! To You are due praise, grace and power! Here I am!”

That evening, after the wuquf, the pilgrims move hastily from Mount ‘Arafat to Muzdalifa, where the pilgrims stay overnight and make arrangement for the ritual reenactment of Abraham’s sacrifice of a ram to replace his only son, commemorating the only narrative about Abraham that both the Qur’an and the Hebrew Bible have in common. Although the Hebrew
Bible specifies that the son is Isaac, the text of the Qur’an leaves the son nameless; most Muslims understand the son to be Ishmael. The Quranic version of Abraham’s sacrifice, a bit like Hebrew midrash, presents the only son as an adult collaborating in his father’s monumental obedience: “When [Ishmael] was old enough to run with him, [Abraham] said [to him], ‘Oh, my son, I had a dream vision that I should sacrifice you. Think now, what do you see?’ [Ishmael replied]: ‘Oh my father, do what you are commanded [to do]. You will find me—God willing—among the longsuffering.’ When the two of them had submitted themselves [to God], and [Abraham] had laid [Ishmael] face down, then We [God] cried out to him, ‘O Abraham! You have already proven faithful to the vision.’ Indeed thus do We reward those who live virtuously” (Qur’an 37:102-105). Muslims throughout the world join the pilgrims in commemorating this incredible act of self-surrender—Islam, in its most radical sense—on the tenth day of the month of Dhu’l-Hijja, calling the day ‘Id al-adha’ (The Feast of the Oblation). On the night of the ninth of Dhu’l-hijja and the next day the pilgrims gather stones at Muzdalifa and spend much of the next few days ritually stoning what may have been ancient, pre-Islamic idols still preserved for such symbolic repudiation at Mina.

For many Muslims the hajj also serves, even more importantly, as an education in Islam—either a deepening of what is already known, or an introduction to those elements of the Islamic tradition that have never been emphasized or understood in the previous life of the pilgrim. Several notable African pilgrims in times past have changed their lives and the lives of their neighbors as a result of what they learned in Mecca and its environs, as well as what they learned along the route to and from Mecca. The eleventh-century Almoravid reform of Islam in northwestern Africa and eventually Spain traced its origins to the experiences on the hajj of a chief of the Guddala, a subgroup of the Zenaga Berbers who lived on the borders of present-day Mauritania and Mali. That chief, Yahya ibn Ibrahim, when he made the pilgrimage, realized that he and his fellow Guddala knew virtually nothing of their faith as Muslims. As a result he hired in a teacher from northern Morocco, ‘Abd Allah ibn Ya’Sin, whom he took “with him to his home, where seventy persons assembled to learn and obey.” The Mauritanian pilgrim of the nineteenth century, Ahmad ibn Tuwayr al-Janna (“Ahmad, the son of the little bird of paradise”) dilates at great length in his memoir on all that he learned not only at Mecca and Medina but also in places on his journey to and from Mecca and Medina as diverse as Cairo and Gibraltar. In more recent times the charismatic preacher of the Nation of Islam, Malcolm X, learned on the only hajj he ever made, in the spring of 1964, the racial diversity of the worldwide Muslim community. When he first saw the Ka’ba within the precincts of the Sacred Mosque of Mecca, he was struck by the fact that the worshipers consisted of “thousands upon thousands of praying pilgrims, both sexes, and every size, shape, color, and race in the world.” Travel broadens, they say; pilgrimage—ancient and modern—does much more.

CONCLUSION

Jews still center their faith on Mount Zion, and more dramatically so over the past century or more since the modern Zionist movement began. Some Orthodox Jews fondly visit the tomb of Maimonides, at Tiberias in Galilee, or the gravesites of other scholars and saints, but Jerusalem still provides all Jews with a direction for prayer. The decentering of Christian pilgrimage continues to the present day, although many Christians—not only Knights and Ladies of the Holy Sepulchre—still seek out Jerusalem and the Holy Land more generally, to follow the Via Crucis or to kneel where Jesus was born, where he died and rose, where he ascended into
glory. The rigors of ancient Christian pilgrimage to Jerusalem can be found today more concretely acted out along the Camino de Santiago in Spain, or while fasting and walking in the circular stony penitential ‘beds’ of Saint Patrick’s Purgatory on Station Island in Lough Derg, County Donegal.

Muslims continue to make the pilgrimage in enormous numbers to the places where Abraham encountered God in the Arabian Peninsula. Secondarily, they may also visit the Prophet’s mosque and his tomb in Medina, as well as the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, but those visits are not part of the canonical hajj. Some Shi’i Muslims also seek out the tombs of Muhammad’s son-in-law, ‘Ali, at Najaf, and his grandson, Husayn, at Karbala, both of those holy places in Iraq, as well as the tomb at Mashhad in Iran of the eighth Imam in ‘Ali’s lineage, ‘Ali al-Rida’. I have also seen Shi’i women, their black chadors billowing in the wind, climbing the circling staircase that mounts the ziggurat in Harissa, Lebanon, where Christians have enthroned an image of Notre Dame du Liban. Like so many Muslim women, they seek the intercession of the mother of the Messiah, especially when problems arise with conception, childbirth or the health of children. As Shi’is they also associate Mary, the mother of the persecuted prophet Jesus, with Fatima, the daughter of Muhammad and the sorrowful mother of the martyred Imams.

Circumambulation of a holy place after a pilgrim journey and before a return journey focuses the pilgrim on the mystery at the core of each pilgrimage. I gave some thought to the possibility of making the pilgrimage to Saint Patrick’s Purgatory last summer, while I was in Ireland, but anticipatory arthritic discomfort at the prospect of barefoot circumambulation of those stony beds dissuaded me. Instead, I visited very privately—and well shod—a tiny shrine near the quay on the bank of the Shannon in the village of Terryglass (Tir-na-ghlas) in County Tipperary. Ireland is dotted with holy wells, but this holy well, called Saint Augh’s Well, is much better cared for than many others. Saint Augh’s Well specializes in the cure of eye problems; suitably enough, it is eye-shaped. A nearby sign informs the pilgrim that Saint Augh was a Christian youth and scholar of the ninth century CE who lost his eyes to the cruelty of a pagan Danish chieftain who lived in nearby Slevoir.

Saint Augh was healed at this well, and pilgrims to this site seeking help with ophthalmic problems are urged to do so on four Saturdays in May between sunrise and sunset. There they are to start the single circumambulation of the well, beginning at the flagstone that faces eastward towards the rising sun. At each quarter of the circle the petitioner should recite the Apostles’ Creed once, as well as the Our Father and the Hail Mary five times each. After completing this prayerful circumambulation the pilgrim petitioner should wash his or her eyes with water from the well. A small token of one’s gratitude to God and Saint Augh can be left in the form of flowers strung from a nearby bush.

Imaginary lines of latitude and longitude crisscross our globes, but pilgrim routes map the real world. Many pilgrim routes lead to the crossroads of the world where the three segments of the Afro-Eurasian landmass connect and yet divide: in the neighborhood of Mount Zion, the hill of Golgotha and Mount ‘Arafat. Not infrequently our pilgrim paths have transected each other in that crossroads of the world—sometimes in peace, but too often in war, especially over the past century. In the long run our pilgrim journeys do not call us to advance like Crusaders in battle-array, but to walk in peace round and round again, contemplating the great mysteries that lie at the heart of our faith traditions. On my journey as a Christian—and on your journey as a Jew or
as a Muslim—let us look across at each other, from my path and from your path, and see a fellow pilgrim. Let us pray for each other’s peaceful arrival at places where all of us can circle around the mysteries at the heart of all reality.

Let me conclude with the last two verses of Bunyan’s original hymn:

    Who so beset him round
    With dismal Storys,
    Do but themselves Confound;
    His Strength the more is.
    No Lyon can him fright,
    He’ll with a Gyant Fight,
    But he will have a Right.
    To be a Pilgrim.

    Hobgoblin, nor foul Fiend,
    Can daunt his Spirit:
    He knows, he at the end,
    Shall Life Inherit.
    Then Fancies fly away,
    He’ll fear not what men say,
    He’ll labour Night and Day,
    To be a Pilgrim.
NOTES

1 *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* and *The Pilgrim’s Progress from this World to that which is to come*, ed. Roger Sharrock (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 385.

2 All quotations from the Hebrew Bible derive from the translation published as the *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1999/5759).


4 Note the differences between the Jewish Publication Society version and the New Revised Standard Version translations of Ps 110:4. The former translates the verse as “The LORD has sworn and will not relent, / ‘You are a priest forever, a rightful king by My decree,’” but in a footnote also admits the possibility of translating “a rightful king” as “after the manner of Melchizedek.” The latter translates the same verse as “The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind, / ‘You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek,’” but in a footnote also admits the possibility of translating the phrase as “a rightful king.”

5 See C. E. Bosworth, “AL-SHAM,” *The Encyclopaedia of Islam: New Edition* (Leiden: Brill, 1997) 9: 261. This work will be referred to below as *EI* 2 with the volume and the year of its publication specified.


8 Scheindlin, 173.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., 177.


14 See the anonymous contemporary chronicle of these events entitled *Gesta Francorum et aliorum Hierosolymitanorum* as translated by A. C. Krey in *The First Crusade: The Accounts of Eyewitnesses and Participants* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1921), available online at [www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/gesta-cde.asp](http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/gesta-cde.asp)


16 Jesus also visits Jerusalem for the non-canonical feast of Hanukkah (Jn 10:22), a feast which commemorates the Maccabees’ renewal of the Temple after its profanation by Antiochus IV Epiphanes in the second century BCE.

17 In these Synoptic narratives Jesus identifies his symbolic action with three motifs in the Hebrew Bible: Third Isaiah’s vision of a Temple open even to Gentiles (Is 56:6-7), Jeremiah’s hostility to the Temple as a source of false hope for the citizens of Jerusalem just before the Babylonian Exile (Jer 7:11), and Zechariah’s visionary critique of the presence of traders (or Canaanites) in the Temple (Zech 14:21).


19 Eusebius records a visit, apparently to the Holy Land, by Bishop Melito of Sardis (in what is now western Turkey) during the reign of Marcus Aurelius (161-180 CE), not for pilgrimage but for research into the scriptures that made up the Hebrew Bible: “I came to the east and reached the place where these things were preached and practiced, and learnt accurately the books of the Old Testament.” See *The Ecclesiastical History* [The Loeb Classical Library 153] (Cambridge, MA/London: /Harvard University Press, 1926), 393/IV.xxvi. 4.26.14.


21 Ibid., 401-407/ III. 41-43.


There is a vast literature on the origin of the Crusades. See, for one example, Jonathan Riley-Smith, *The First Crusade and the Idea of Crusading*, 2nd ed. (London: Continuum, 1993).


Ibid., 35.

Ibid.

The other four pillars include the dual witnessing to the oneness of God and the message Muhammad brought (the *shahadatani*); the canonical worship performed five times daily and on Fridays in community at midday (*salat*); the poor-due that purifies legitimate profits (*zakat*); the annual month-long fast usually undertaken in the month of Ramadan (*sawm*). Some Shi‘i Muslims include a sixth pillar in this company: *jihad*, struggle for the cause of God, not necessarily military. See Editors, “RUKN,” *EI* 2 (1995) 8:596.

All Quranic translations in this text are my own.

Grabar, 50.


36 See the censorious observations on these practices by the twentieth-century Indo-Pakistani moralist, Sayyid Abu’l Al’a Mawdudi (d. 1979) in his *Let Us Be Muslims*, ed. Khurram Murad (Leicester, UK: The Islamic Foundation, 1982/1406 AH), 254-55.

37 Some authors suggest that Muhammad’s break with the Jewish communities in Medina may have also influenced this change of *qibla*. See A. J. Wensinck, “KIBLA,” *EI* 2 (1986) 5:82-83.


