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Searching for the Green Man: Researching Pilgrimage in Israel/Palestine and Egypt

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> This article examines contemporary pilgrimage in Israel / Palestine and Egypt, based upon field work conducted December 2017-February 2018 and personal narrative. My argument is twofold: first, I contend that Pilgrimage Studies allows scholars to move beyond reductive labels and consider the implicit 'messiness' of religious faith and ritual praxis. I introduce the Islamic al-Khidr and Moses story from Qur'an 18.60-82, as an interpretative model, suggesting that rigid categorization—especially concerning religious identity and sectarian division—promotes a false narrative of monolithic faith traditions that, upon closer examination, does not fully exist. Second, by referencing my ethnographic experiences, I consider pilgrimage as fundamentally located in the body, often fraught with moral ambiguity and physical trauma.

> **Key Words**: pilgrimage, pilgrimage studies, al-Khidr, Jerusalem, Palestine, Egypt

Introduction

In December 2017, I began working on a new book project featuring both historical and contemporary pilgrimage rituals in Christianity and Islam. As a medieval historian, I gathered early Christian and Islamic journals and hagiographies that describe pilgrims' motivations, experiences, and theological concerns. I also planned an ethnographic component, integrating new (to me) methodologies and research strategies that added 'living' pilgrims to the dead's archived voices. Sabbatical plans emerged; my 12-year-old son Cody and I would recreate ancient travel paths in Israel/Palestine, Egypt and Turkey between December 2017 and February 2018. I would interview pilgrims as well as continue researching early/medieval pilgrimage narratives. I also anticipated gaining insights into gendered sacred space and embodied ritual practice as experienced by myself/female and my adolescent son/male. Even though academic research objectives defined our travel itineraries, these embodied experiences would link us with our fellow travellers. I did not anticipate appropriating the mythical figure, the Green Man, to epitomize—and discern—our journey.

Various world cultures and historical epochs celebrate eternal life, regeneration, and natural fecundity with the Green Man, a folkloric figure that appears in religious and secular story, sculpture, and architecture. Artists often depict the Green Man conjoined with leaves, vines, and other vegetation. Green Man depictions pass from pagan tradition into Christian monumental ornamentation, with some exegetes even merging Jesus with the archetypal salvific figure (Basford, 1978). In Islam, the Green Man is known as al-Khidr (from the Arabic root for 'green'), and he functions as the source of mystical knowledge as well as life itself. In many Muslim cultures, he serves as the patron of travellers generally and the 'seekers of knowledge' more specifically. Many Quranic exegetes interpret Al-Khidr as the Quranic hero in the Sura of the Cave / chapter 18 (Halman, 2013; Wheeler, 2002). The Sura narrates al-Khidr's interactions with (and chastisements of) Moses as he reveals God's hidden workings to the beloved Prophet.

In our initial explorations of Jerusalem, Cody and I encountered a Green Man in a most unexpected form, and he soon became a light-hearted yet meaningful symbol for our travels. Most Israeli/Palestinian, hectic traffic intersections feature a lighted, green human
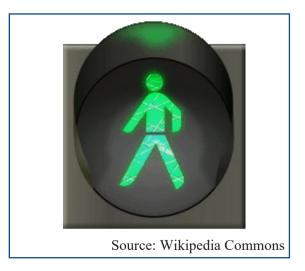

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figure at pedestrian crossings. We literally searched for the Green Man to point us in the right direction—when we saw his bright figure, we recognised safe travels ahead. With our own 'secret code,' we toured Israel's unfamiliar streets searching for our Green Man to guide us. We used him to mark our common routes—turn left at the third Green Man for the coffee shop, right for the bus stop. We laughed about his blinking figure because that meant our time was literally 'running out.'

After recognizing the popular pedestrian symbol, I described to Cody al-Khidr's significance in Islam, and he enjoyed the double-entendre. Yet, we began to invoke the Green Man as more than just a humorous aside; the folkloric figure offered an interpretative tool for many travel experiences, both those specific to us (two Americans) and those shared by pilgrims we encountered. The Green Man, an attempt to 'order' hectic traffic patterns, came to represent my own quest for ordered certainties among a chaotic fusion of religious communities and travellers.

In this article, I will explore contemporary pilgrimage accessed through personal narrative and interviews conducted in Israel/Palestine and Egypt. My argument is two-fold: first, I consider how frail theological and sectarian categories appear when applied to 'lived religion,' especially among pilgrims who travel for so many 'moods and motivations.' Second, I argue that because of those unstable categories, pilgrimage might be best understood not in terms of ritual orthodoxy or sectarian identity, but the very human and embodied vulnerabilities experienced along the way.

I will reference al-Khidr's life and legacies in early Islamic tradition (Qur'an and hadith) as an interpretative tool to access both the instability of academic categories when applied in the field as well as the inherent vulnerabilities that define religious travel. Before exploring this model, however, I will first provide a fuller description of al-Khidr as identified in the Qur'an and early Islamic exegesis. Al-Khidr's story requires the reader to move beyond simple classifications, an important element in understanding pilgrimage itself.

The Green Man in Islamic Tradition

As mentioned above, the archetypal Green Man appears across cultures, usually representing re/birth, eternal life, and fecundity. Folklorists have emphasised the almost universal association between the colour 'green' and vitality, prolific in religious and secular contexts alike. Throughout the Mediterranean world, the Green Man also merges with stories of the Christian Saint George, the biblical Elijah, and even Alexander the Great's popular cook as recounted in the Alexander Romance cycle (Arjana, 2017; Haddad, 1969; Meri, 1999). Several shrines in Palestine (just outside Bethlehem), Turkey, Jordan, and Egypt are dedicated to St. George/al-Khidr, often attracting both Christians and Muslims (Albera and Couroucli, 2012). This paper focuses primarily on the Islamic understanding of the Green Man, independent of St. George, and his theological significance discussed by generations of Quranic scholars and Sufi masters.

Ironically, the Qur'an never identifies the Green Man by name, yet early hadith attributed to the Prophet Muhammad and his companions equate the mysterious teacher in Sura 18 with the legendary figure. According to the Quranic narrative, Moses meets 'one of Our servants' who ultimately chastens the Prophet for his lack of patience. I include verses 60-82 here for those unfamiliar with the story:

> *Moses said to his servant, 'I will not rest until I reach the place where the two seas meet, even if it takes me some years!' but when they reached the place where the two seas meet, they had forgotten all about their fish, which made its way into the sea and swam away. They journeyed on, and then Moses said to his servant, 'Give us our morning meal! This journey of ours is very tiring.' And [the servant] said, 'Remember when we were resting by the rock? I forgot the fish—Satan made me forget to pay attention to it—and it [must have] made its way into the sea.' 'How strange!' Moses said, 'Then that was the place we were looking for.' So the two turned back, retraced their footsteps, and found one of Our servants—a man to whom We had granted Our mercy and whom We had given knowledge of Our own.*

> *Moses said to him, 'May I follow you so that you can teach me some of the right guidance you have been taught?' The man said, 'You will not be able to bear with me patiently. How could you be patient in matters beyond your knowledge?' Moses said, 'God willing, you will find me patient. I will not disobey you in any way.' The man said, 'If you follow me then, do not query anything I do before I mention it to you myself.'*

> *They travelled on. Later, when they got into a boat, and the man made a hole in it, Moses said, 'How could you make a hole in it? Do you want to drown its passengers? What a strange thing to do!' He replied, 'Did I not tell you that*

you would never be able to bear with me patiently?' Moses said, 'Forgive me for forgetting. Do not make it too hard for me to follow you.' And so they travelled on. Then, when they met a young boy and the man killed him, Moses said, 'How could you kill an innocent person? He has not killed anyone! What a terrible thing to do!' He replied, 'Did I not tell you that you would never be able to bear with me patiently?' Moses said, 'From now on, if I query anything you do, banish me from your company—you have put up with enough from me.' And so they travelled on. Then, when they came to a town and asked the inhabitants for food but were refused hospitality, they saw a wall there that was on the point of falling down and the man repaired it. Moses said, 'But if you had wished you could have taken payment for doing that.'

He said, 'This is where you and I part company. I will tell you the meaning of the things you could not bear with patiently: the boat belonged to some needy people who made their living from the sea and I damaged it because I knew that coming after them was a king who was seizing every [serviceable] *boat by force. The young boy had parents who were people of faith, and so, fearing he would trouble them through wickedness and disbelief, we wished that their Lord should give them another child—purer and more compassionate—in his place. The wall belonged to two young orphans in the town and there was buried treasure beneath it belonging to them. Their father had been a righteous man, so your Lord intended them to reach maturity and then dig up their treasure as a mercy from your Lord. I did not do* [these things] *of my own accord: these are the explanations for those things you could not bear with patience.'*[1]

This encounter between al-Khidr and Moses has been probed and scrutinized from more perspectives than I could possibly summarise here. Most Sufi commentaries explicate the master / student relationship modelled by the two while distinguishing between internal and external knowledge (Halman, 2013: 106-247). For my purposes here, I focus on failed categories, with the valuation of deeper / internal knowledge (exemplified by al-Khidr) over superficial / external labels (as worn by the Prophet Moses). I also reference Moses's own traumas as he travels with his spiritual guide, faced with (what he perceives as) moral offenses as well as humiliations.

The narrative opens with Moses and a servant (exegetes disagree about his identity) searching for the 'meeting of the two seas,' generally recognised as immortality. After the travellers grow weary and hungry, they return to the spot where they earlier lost their fish—usually read as where the dead fish returned to life and swam away. Indeed, the two had located the 'meeting of the seas' but neglected it at the time. There, they meet 'one of Our servants,' who receives knowledge directly from God's presence (`ilm al-ladunni). Already the reader might be confused—a Prophet is unable to fully recognise / understand the source of immortality; also, who should claim a more intimate connection to God than the Prophets themselves? Al-Khidr then criticises Moses for his lack of patience (*sabr*) as he fails three tests. Surah 18 dissolves various conventional categories of religious knowledge and spiritual authority as the travelling Prophet submits to a mysterious stranger.

The wisdom al-Khidr reveals to Moses, gained through experience instead of revelation, strains many moral sensibilities as well. Broadly speaking, al-Khidr's three lessons accentuate God's ultimate justice and humanity's failure to fully grasp its complexity. Al-Khidr destroys a boat; kills a young man; and repairs a town wall with no expectation of remuneration, all because God desires it ('I did not do these things of my own accord'). While this endorses the traditional Islamic article of faith emphasising God's 'ultimate power of determination over all phenomena' (*qadar*), it introduces certain moral dissonance. Most specifically, al-Khidr slays a young 'innocent' man because God desires to reward his parents with 'one better.' When Moses questions the act, al-Khidr censures his lack of patience and incomplete understanding; yet, even the Green Man's explanation of God's 'inner knowledge' strains human conceptions of justice. Al-Khidr ultimately abandons Moses, whose traumatic journey ends in humiliation and rejection. Remarkably, this narrative enshrines tension within Islamic tradition itself—the strain between the *expected* (Prophets with superior knowledge) and the *encountered;* and the necessary *limits* of human interpretation and recognition. For our travels into Israel/Palestine and Egypt, such tensions seemed unavoidable, with us and our fellow travellers. The flashing pedestrian Green Man managed Jerusalem's frenzied traffic but also initiated us into contemporary pilgrimage experiences where predetermined categories crumble and absolutes prove illusory.

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1. I use M.A.S. Abdel Haleem's translation, *The Qur'an: English Translation and Parallel Arabic Text.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Failed Categories: Religious Identities and Sectarian Divisions

Scholars of religion are well-acquainted with unstable categories; indeed, most academics disagree on definitions of 'religion' itself. Classifying pilgrimage can also be slippery: basically understood as voluntary travel for sacred purpose, pilgrimage seldom involves singular motivations. Al-Khidr and Moses' Quranic encounter reminds us of this 'messiness:' Moses and his companion are pilgrims seeking the 'source of immortality,' yet they fail to notice when mystical waters resurrect their fish. A mysterious, itinerant teacher then reveals a Prophet's spiritual weaknesses through three tests. While I certainly expected shifting categories during our travels, even the most basic classifications posed unique challenges.

More specifically, my 'tool chest' of identifiers for religious identity disintegrated while interviewing practitioners and pilgrims in Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Cairo. Labels are notoriously problematic in Israel/Palestine—many Israelis do not acknowledge the term 'Palestine' as geographically or historically significant; many Palestinians will not use 'Israeli' as a descriptor of any sort; and, Arab Israelis exist within a political quagmire. Likewise, the term 'Shi`ite' is virtually meaningless in Cairo, even among pious devotees of the Prophet's Holy Family (including his cousin / son-in-law `Ali, daughter Fatima, and grandsons Hasan and Husayn).[2] I expected—and experienced—a certain degree of such 'messiness.' A Jewish settler in Hebron explained why the term 'settler' offends him (Jews have the most ancient claim to the land, after all); a Palestinian female teacher in Hebron resented the de-humanising travel restrictions she experienced daily; and, a shocked Egyptian businessman impatiently explained to me that 'there are *no* Shi`ites in Egypt,' only poor, uneducated people who practice heterodox rituals dedicated to Husayn and the Prophet's family.[3]

And the unexpected messiness? Cody and I arrived in Jerusalem the day before President Trump announced his plans to move the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to the ancient Holy City. Reporters had anticipated these plans since his presidential campaign, but the official statement proclaimed the move was 'the right thing to do….something that has to be done' (Landler, 2017). World news groups immediately turned their cameras to Palestinian leaders and West Bank venues known for political protest, documenting people's responses and, perhaps more salaciously, hoping for images of violent demonstration. In Jerusalem, the Old City's Damascus Gate (*bab al-`amud*) adjacent to the Muslim Quarter serves as one such area for popular rallies, and Cody and I passed through Damascus Gate almost daily throughout the month of December.

Luckily, demonstrations at Damascus Gate had little effect on our daily lives; we never witnessed violent conflict even though we frequented the area. Other objections, scarcely covered by news sources I referenced, did require some accommodations—usually because of unified boycotts instead of violent rallies. For example, President Trump announced the embassy move on a Wednesday, December 6; we had scheduled an Old City guided tour on that Thursday. About an hour into the tour, however, I was genuinely confused: where were the Old City's notorious bustling crowds and aggressive shop keepers? Few people, other than small tour groups, roamed the narrow streets, and locked metal doors lined the walls. Our guide sensed the confusion and explained: after years in the 'tourism industry,' he had never seen the streets so deserted. Multiple Jewish, Muslim, and Christian business owners had closed their shops that day in solidarity *against* Trump's announcement. While news agencies emphasised regional divisions between Palestine and Israel, we experienced something quite different. Distinctions between Palestinian/Israeli and Muslim/Jew collapsed under a shared angst of American interventions.

Every Israeli citizen that I interviewed expressed anxiety about America's plan to move their embassy to Jerusalem; yet, this seemed to contradict the plethora of signage—from billboards to streetlights—that celebrated the collaboration between 'JerUSAlem and Washington.' After encountering multiple signs, I finally noticed a common source cited in small print. The Friends of Zion, a Christian Zionist organization founded by American Mike Evans, funded every street sign we viewed that advocated for an American embassy in Jerusalem (Estrin, 2018).[4] Indeed, while riding the public transit system, I heard several Israelis warn visitors to disregard those signs. While I expected a cultural milieu emphasising distinctions between

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2) Ironic, as the medieval Shi`ite Fatimid dynasty ruled from Egypt, and founded *al-Qāhirah*/Cairo as its capital, beginning in the 10th century. Fatimid art and architecture permeates the old city, layered amidst ancient, Mamluk, and Ottoman artistic styles. See the fine introduction to saint veneration as inscribed in Cairo's material culture, in Caroline Williams', 'The Cult of `Alid Saints in the Fatimid Monuments of Cairo, Part I: the Mosque of al-Aqmar,' *Muqarnas,* V. 1 (1983): 37-52.
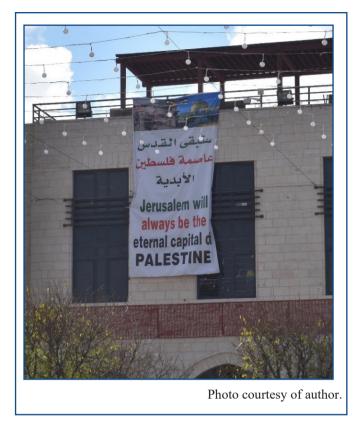
3) Interviews conducted in Hebron, January 3, and Cairo, January 11, 2018.

Palestinian/Israeli and Muslim/Jew, I instead experienced a profoundly united suspicion of Americans and their (our?) motivations.

During our stay in Jerusalem, the space surrounding the Wailing Wall remained relatively frenetic, featuring multiple bar mitzvahs, military units' oath-taking ceremonies, and nightly Hanukkah menorah lightings; yet, Christian sites proved most remarkable for their easy access amidst small crowds. Bethlehem and Nazareth were also remarkably accessible; on our first trip to Bethlehem on December 14, we walked directly from our bus to the Church of the Nativity without lines or delays. One Arab Christian tour guide, Ashraf Shaheen, noted that pilgrimage had decreased in previous years but the current season was particularly disappointing.

According to Shaheen, Bethlehem once boasted a vibrant pilgrim/tourism trade, decimated first by the intifadas and, second, by Israeli policies that restrict tourism companies to two-hour visits. With little time allotted to Bethlehem, tour groups now generally go directly to Manger Square, bypassing streets lined with shops and restaurants. Everyone I interviewed in Bethlehem emphasized Palestinian Christian/Muslim solidarity against Trump's planned embassy move; indeed, Muslims and Christians collectively extinguished Manger Square's Christmas lights the evening after Trump's announcement. A huge sign adjacent to the Church of the Nativity also advertised Jerusalem as Palestine's 'eternal capital.' Once again, while most Palestinians that I interviewed voiced fear regarding the Israeli government's restrictive policies, they linked recent aggressions to intrusive American political initiatives.

During our second trip to Bethlehem on December 24, we rode the Palestinian public bus and I met several Christian pilgrims making their way to Jesus' birthplace. One particular woman, of Indian descent, began our conversation with, 'have you been recently? Is it dangerous?' After describing the peaceful conditions we had experienced earlier, she explained that she had lived in Ramla, Israel, for three years and travelled to Bethlehem each Christmas for prayer. This year, for the first time, she had considered not going because of violent images on the news. For her, recent political demonstrations really related to one thing: accessibility to where Jesus lived and died.

4) Many American pilgrimage groups, a curious mixture of both Jews and evangelical Christians (who view the embassy's move as apocalyptic), have more recently added Jerusalem's US embassy to their itineraries.

Photo courtesy of author.

My travelling companion was born in India; she married an abusive gambler; and, later she had two sons, one with Down's Syndrome. One day, after her husband almost beat her to death, she decided to commit suicide. As she sat on a bench, dressed in her simplest sari with no jewellery, she prepared to jump in front of a train. Before she could do so, a stranger approached and asked about her suffering; she described her plan, and her 'angel' then convinced her not to harm herself. This 'miracle' proved to my companion that God cared about her—and her sons, who would be defenceless without her. As her sons matured, she sought employment abroad as a personal nurse/caregiver. She worked for about 20 years in Saudi Arabia, learning Arabic, and then tried to emigrate to Canada. After waiting years for travel documents, she finally conceded and applied for a job with an Arab family in Ramla.

Her employment contract included constant care for an aging man, with no real 'time off.' She explained to her employers that, as a Christian, she required time to worship. When they offered a couple hours each Sunday, she declined; instead, she negotiated one weekend each month to travel to Jerusalem (and, in December, from Jerusalem to Bethlehem). She described the spiritual ecstasy she felt as she would lay across the Holy Sepulchre's anointing stone; follow the *via dolorosa* with the Franciscan monks; and take communion in the Holy City. She also expressed,
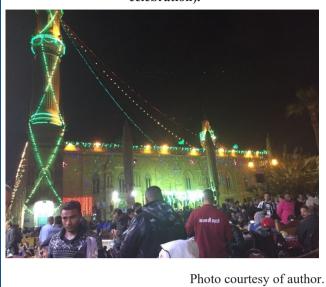
however, the emotional release she felt at being 'free' for those two days—away from her employer, away from work responsibilities, able to feel 'like a woman again.' She showed me a large array of 'selfies' she had taken in Jerusalem, with her stylish hair and clothes instead of a nurse's uniform. A Christian woman travelling monthly to Jerusalem to pray and retreat to 'sacred space'—a place 'set apart' from the mundane in the purest sense.

My companion, a pilgrim of many motivations, also expressed strong opinions about the Christian sectarian divisions that dominate Jerusalem's spiritual landscape but, for her, they are meaningless. She explained that she identified as Christian, 'just Christian,' and once asked an Armenian priest, after he refused her communion, 'Is this something Jesus taught, or something you made up yourself?' Greek Orthodox priests offered her blessed bread (*antidoron*) instead of the consecrated host; she retorted that she was not 'of some low caste' and should receive the liturgical element. She described the Armenian and Coptic priests as the most 'rude' (which I interpreted as 'restrictive') and Syrian as the most welcoming. Thus, even in this holy place of retreat, she navigates sectarian labels to find her own sense of 'belonging;' indeed, she advised me to always attend St. Mark's, the Syriac Orthodox Church located in the Old City's Armenian Quarter, because it is 'the best in town.'

When Cody and I journeyed into Cairo, we did not encounter much immediate political tension and suspicion of Americans. Egyptian president el-Sisi had condemned the planned embassy relocation (at least publicly) and warned against violent protests that might erupt (BBCa, 2017). One reason for the warm reception, as many businessmen and tour guides told us, related to the depressed Egyptian economy and tourism trade. Since 2010's 'Arab Spring' demonstrations and El-Sisi's 2014 revolution, tourism—a staple of Egypt's economy—has plummeted. Thus, two American travellers including a single mother and her son signalled renewed faith in travel safety.

The day after we arrived in Cairo, Cody and I explored the neighbourhood around our apartment. We immediately noticed our Green Man's complete *absence*. The now-familiar pedestrian symbol had marked traffic crossings in Israel/Palestine, but Cairo's streets were much more hectic. We saw very few traffic lights, no pedestrian walks, and extreme congestion (including a few horse carts mingled with the automobiles). Aside from the metro, the public

Al-Husayn's Mosque adorned for *mawlid* (birthday celebration).

Photo courtesy of author.

transit system proved impossible to navigate, with no posted public stops or schedule; locals just knew 'about' when and where the micro-buses would pass. Instead, we relied upon taxis, Uber, and Careem (a local taxi app). That worked well … until unstable wi-fi interrupted the travel apps. Traffic density and dependable transport proved to be constant obstacles; for example, one particular trip from our apartment to al-Husayn mosque—a distance of 7.2 miles—took 1.5 hours during the saint's busy birthday (*mawlid*) festival.

These travel realities required me to 'reimagine' what constituted pilgrimage in Cairo's bustling streets. I did most of my work at two mosques dedicated to Husayn and Sayyida Zaynab, the Prophet Muhammad's grandson and granddaughter, located in the city centre. As I began to interview men and women at the mosques, I met Muslims from outside Egypt, mostly visiting for Husayn's *mawlid* festivities; from towns within a day's journey (including Luxor and Aswan regions); and, local families from 'other areas' of Cairo. All three groups referred to their pious trips as *ziyarat* (or, visitations). Even Cairenes, travelling from across town, would invest a significant amount of time, money, and endurance to reach their sacred destinations. Families often ventured together, not only because of conservative gender expectations (men accompanying women) but also because of the journey's exhaustive nature. As do most Muslim cultures, Cairo offers many neighbourhood mosques for daily worship; visiting the sacred spaces dedicated to the Holy Family even from across town requires

significant effort. Cairo's population density and traffic conditions would try Moses' patience no less than al-Khidr's pedagogical style.

My 'tool chest' of labels also collapsed as it had in Jerusalem as I interviewed pilgrims and pious Muslims dedicated to the Prophet's family. Mystic, Sufi, saint, pilgrim-from-across-town—all these terms failed to fully capture the myriad of devotional practices and beliefs encountered, and none more so than the distinctions between 'Sunni' and 'Shi`a.' In a way similar to my Christian companion in Jerusalem, who desired to be 'Christian'—not Orthodox, or Catholic, or Armenian—'just' Christian, so too did most Muslims I interviewed in Cairo identify as 'just' Muslim. Even for those who disputed those ritual practices exhibited at al-Husayn and Sayyida Zaynab mosques as unconventional, unlearned, or even heterodox—they were not 'Shi`ite' (a label which, for most, signalled non-Egyptian and extremist).

In Egypt and Israel/Palestine, many labels I brought with me proved, in the end, inadequate; religious identity and sectarian division shifted and blurred in ways I did not anticipate. As demonstrated by al-Khidr to Moses, external observations and classifications seldom reveal the more complicated—and entangled—'Truths.' Jerusalemites postured against America, and Cairenes (even those devoted to Muhammad's Holy Family) defined themselves against the 'violent Shi`a,' reminding me that religious identity is constantly re/negotiated amidst political / social power. Categories, too often formulated as dichotomies, never 'settle:' Muslim/Jew; Israeli/Palestinian; Sunni/Shi`ite/Sufi.

In both regions, a second category shifted beyond what I had hoped *would* be a simple dichotomy, a yes/no response: are you *safe*? Historically, pilgrimage has always involved personal risk as travellers pass through violent lands and experience physical traumas. Theologically, Christianity and Islam embrace those risks as displays of ascetic piety, or personal sacrifice that intensifies the spiritual encounter with the Divine. For me, this question of vulnerability never seemed as paramount in previous research trips—this was the first time I had travelled with my son.

Safety in Sacred Lands

When I first started planning our pilgrimage, many friends and family members asked about our 'safety;' indeed, some questioned whether a responsible parent would take her child to the Middle East in the current political climate. Security concerns peaked, of course, when we first ventured through check-points travelling into the West Bank/Palestine. Our initial trip to Bethlehem was with a tour group; the first glimpse of the separation wall was daunting, but the trip was easy. The driver took us directly into town where we met our Palestinian Christian guide who bemoaned the current political drama regarding the embassy move and noted frequent tear gas attacks against his neighbourhood's protestors. We arrived on a Friday, and our guide explained that we should be returning to Jerusalem by noon, well before demonstrations might ignite after Friday sermon/*khutba*.

Subsequent trips to Bethlehem were not so easy. Using on-line searches, I gained a basic understanding of the Palestinian bus routes to Bethlehem, which took some effort (the Israeli bus system travels to the check-point but not into Bethlehem itself). Israel has a popular public transit app called 'Moovit;' enter your location and destination, and the app displays available trolley/bus/shared taxi routes and schedules. 'Moovit' only links to Israeli public transit, however; even though Israeli and Palestinian buses ride side-by-side along the same streets, the local travel app lists only Israeli transport. For pilgrims within Israel/Palestine, most digital media effectively privilege Israeli products and services, thus making it difficult 'to get there (Palestinian Territories) from here (Israel).'

The tensions so palpable at checkpoints and border crossings in Israel also prevailed at several spaces in Egypt. Egyptian police concerns for Islamic sectarian violence (ostensibly by ISIS) as well as hostility toward Coptic Christians, required layers of security at key locations. Ironically, the necessary surge in security corresponds with attempts to revitalise tourism. The declining travel industry has devastated the economy, with the Egyptian pound plummeting in value (Mohamed and Elseyoufi, 2018). To help recover, Egypt's Tourism Authority has focused on promoting beach destinations, renowned ancient sites, *and* an important Christian pilgrimage route.

According to early Christian sources (elaborated upon in Coptic tradition), the Holy Family travelled through Egypt as they escaped Judean King Herod's wrath (d.c.4 BCE). To protect the Christ-child from the 'massacre of innocents,' an angel instructed Joseph to flee with Mary into Egypt. Various apocryphal texts and Church Fathers recount the Family's journey from Palestine, through the Sinai, and into Lower and Upper Egypt (Meinardus, 1986). Local churches and shrines that commemorate where they slept, springs where they drank, and trees they touched, evolved into sacred

Cave church commemorating the Holy Family's sojourn in the Church of Saints Sergius and Bacchus.

Stone shelf where Jesus slept.

Well used by Holy Family.

Photos courtesy of author.

water, and rest in a cave. A fifth-century Church celebrated that sojourn, is now the Church of Saints Sergius and Bacchus. The Holy Family's cave resides in the lower crypt and remains accessible to pilgrims and tourists; it features a well from which they drank and a stone cradle where Jesus slept. The cave showcases the well, visible through plexiglass, and announces Jesus' sleeping space in both English and Arabic.

The increased violence against Coptic communities, however, makes a dynamic pilgrimage trade more difficult. Coptic Christians compose about ten percent of Egypt's primarily Muslim population, with a vibrant history of inter-religious affiliation. Coptic Christians and Muslims share sacred sites, including those dedicated to Saint George/al-Khidr, and even jointly recognize a series of Marian visions that occurred between 1968-71 at Zeitoun, a district in Cairo.[6] At other times, however, the relationship has been more strained; violence against Copts has climaxed since 2016 as part of ISIS's campaign against regional Christian 'infidels,' describing them as their 'favourite prey' (Steinbuch, 2017). The Islamic State has targeted some of the most popular Coptic Orthodox churches and monasteries, striking at busloads of pilgrims and worshippers gathered for prayer.

As Cody and I travelled in Israel/Palestine and Egypt, we never personally witnessed violence, nor did we ever feel immediately threatened. The low, simmering anxiety prompted by ample armed security and political unrest made our pilgrimage difficult, however. Admittedly, concerns for physical dangers have always marked pilgrimage experience; medieval travellers imagined the potential for natural disasters, bandits, and the uncertainties of war. Wealthy pilgrims often set executors over their estates and designated heirs as they commenced their pious journeys. Christian pilgrims without lands or estates tried at least to secure funerary masses should they die while travelling. Both Christian and Muslim pilgrims prayed for saintly intercession at sacred sites along their routes (Meri, 2002; Ohler, 1989; Webb, 2001). Before we began our own journey, I had an academic understanding of these concerns, yet they seemed historically distant and unrelated. In the end, I underestimated the anxieties related to those real, physical assaults, the simmering fears situated so profoundly in the body.

pilgrimage sites. Now, with proper marketing, it seems the Holy Family's travel itinerary could provide a miraculous cure for the current tourism crisis.[5]

A particularly popular stop on the Family's itinerary relates to their return journey in what is now called 'Old Cairo.' According to tradition, the Family recovered there from travel weariness, finding food,

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5) Coptic Orthodox Pope His Holiness Shenouda III helped finalize the Holy Family's map and travel itinerary, translated into various languages for marketing, before his death in 2012.

6) According to tradition, St. Mary's Coptic Church marked a stop on the Holy Family's itinerary, but became more popular after a Muslim male spotted a glowing figure atop the structure on April 2, 1968. The visionary experiences continued over the next 2-3 years, attracting Christians, Muslims, and non-religious alike.

Most travellers I interviewed also described the physical as well as emotional strains they experienced during their trips. These anxieties related to modes of transport including flight delays, lost luggage, uncertain bus schedules, and frenzied traffic. Independent travellers, such as Cody and myself, struggled with these on a daily basis, planning and plotting ways to get from point A to point B. While Google Maps, Google Translate, TripAdvisor, and taxi apps have relieved much of the associated angst, technology often fails (especially in rural areas). Group pilgrimage—designed by travel experts and local guides—alleviates many of these concerns, just as they did in the ancient world. Yet, certain simmering anxieties persist, whether traveling in a guided tour, an Uber, or on-foot. Most commonly, travellers of all sorts expressed concerns for amorphous threats such as religious extremism (largely characterised as emotional and unpredictable) and political instability (perhaps more predictable yet equally volatile). All these fears ultimately reflect the pilgrim's basic *vulnerability*—feelings of helplessness and exposure.

Even though destination and travel modes / mechanisms might differ, pilgrimage *unifies* in this curious way—ultimately pilgrimage occurs in the *body,* complete with its vulnerabilities and sensitivities. Whether travelling to Jerusalem's Old City, an historic mosque in Cairo, or Nazareth's famed House of Mary, pilgrims participate in *embodied practice*, with all the somatic complexities that includes. They might travel in various degrees of ease—public transport vs. air conditioned coaches, luxury hotels vs. hostels—yet they necessarily share a vulnerability, both physical and emotional, that leads to spiritual transformation or, perhaps conversely, emotional trauma.

This became particularly relevant to me in mid-January as I began to finalise our travel plans to Turkey. Originally, our itinerary included a February flight from Cairo to Istanbul, and then visits to shared pilgrimage sites in Antakya / Antioch and Ephesus. As our departure date approached, I entered our addresses and travel information into the State Department's online STEP program for American citizens travelling abroad. I immediately received a prompt discouraging American travel particularly to Hatay and Atakya—our exact destinations—citing ISIS operatives and the threat of civilian kidnapping. That was the day I first experienced sharp pains shooting across my chest.

After such initial symptoms that also included shortness of breath, several of my Egyptian friends and colleagues recommended doctors and medical facilities available to travellers, not just Cairenes. My concern

for my son grew, however; what would happen if I had to be hospitalized? How would that affect him? Ultimately, I decided to cancel our trip to Turkey and end our journey ahead of schedule. The low, simmering anxieties in Israel/Palestine and Egypt had manifested themselves in profoundly physical ways, and I did not anticipate a simple 'cure' for those ailments. Even though I have no family history of heart disease, the sharp chest pains and breathing problems continued, despite any rest or taking a 'day off.' In our months of travel, I had witnessed numerous religious devotees press x-rays against Sayyida Zaynab's tomb in hopes for miraculous healing, and watched women weep before Rachel's tomb, praying for a child from a barren womb. I now joined in their suffering with a physical frailty, accompanied by a shocking sense of vulnerability. That vulnerability, I think, is an essential element in defining—and understanding—pilgrimage, if not 'religion' itself. It is the human—the *somatic*—rendering of belief and ritual praxis that unites religious travellers, even as pre-conceived sectarian or nationalist labels diminish.

Conclusions

The academic study of religion has a long history of categorising constellations of faith and practice that, while intended to clarify, ultimately reify independent systems that ignore diversity. Categories such as *Christianity, Islam*, and *Sufism*—these terms exist fully in scholarly imagination; they merely echo the complexities found in humanity's belief systems and ritual praxis. No religious tradition is monolithic; instead, religious identity consistently negotiates between text and interpretation; universal tradition and localized power (both political and economic); and, virtuous ideals and embodied experience.

Pilgrimage Studies provides a perfect opportunity to consider these myriad complexities: like other religious labels, when examined closely, pilgrimage looks quite messy—as does religion itself. Jewish/Muslim sectarian divisions diminish amid international politics; a woman's desire for conception motivates more than a conservative Imam's warning against saint veneration; and, Jewish/Christian/Muslim shop owners unite to protect tourism against political assault. Understood basically as voluntary travel to spaces of sacred power, pilgrimage resists objectification. A pilgrimage site might appeal across traditional identities, just as Christians and Muslims attend shrines dedicated to St. George/Al-Khidr in Bethlehem and Turkey, or Israelis visit the Western Wall from nationalistic pride instead of spiritual piety.

Pilgrimage destinations motivate sacred travellers in multiple ways, offering peaceful retreat, organised (and digitised) travel guides, and even good restaurants. Pilgrimage almost always links with tourism and commercial opportunities, appealing to spiritual devotion and good, old-fashioned materialism. As ancient pilgrims relied upon scripture and hagiographies for sacred geography, contemporary travellers imagine their itineraries framed by TripAdvisor and Lonely Planet on-line posts. Organised pilgrimage is a business with savvy marketing campaigns that promise to meet multiple human needs. Pilgrimage Studies thus moves beyond simple categories and requires us to recognise the deeper complexities—and fluidities—of religious identity itself.

In this article, I introduced al-Khidr and Moses as an allegorical reminder of this approach. The patron of travellers, al-Khidr prompts us to seek Truth, but to look patiently beyond external / surface definitions. Just as the label 'pilgrimage' functions only as an introduction to meaning, so too should we consider markers such as Jewish/Muslim, Greek Orthodox/ Roman Catholic, or Sunni/Shi`ite. Also, pilgrimage—regardless of geography—is located ultimately in the *body,* straining physical, psychological, and emotional boundaries, thus urging transformation.

Much like Moses, I met my own Green Man during our research pilgrimage, obliging me to blur the lines between 'observant ethnographer' and 'participant' as I unexpectedly shared in ritual practitioners' vulnerabilities and suffering. Also as with Moses, at the beginning of our journey, I had imagined locating the 'meaning' of pilgrimage through hearing spoken creeds and observing ritual performance; instead, I discovered that shared somatic experiences position 'pilgrimage' not only in external, geographical space but also in an internal landscape riddled with radical uncertainties. There, *'ilm/*knowledge is mediated through the most intimate media imaginable—the *body*—and in my case, not just my own, but my son's as well.

Indeed, al-Khidr led Moses by didactic *experience* (even trauma) instead of inspired revelation. As so often emphasized by Sufi exegetes, al-Khidr-as-guide exposed Moses-as-traveller to physical dangers, moral ambiguities, and humiliation in his spiritual training, stretching his patience to its breaking point. The Green Man shattered the prophet's expectations and replaced them with uncertainties—fundamental to the spiritual transformation explicitly (or implicitly) sought by travellers to sacred spaces. The Green Man thus offers an important methodological 'cue' in Religious Studies more broadly, reminding us to always peer beyond the labels.

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