

## Article

# Race and the Politics of Pilgrimage for African American Christians in Palestine and Israel

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**Abstract:** African American Christian travel to Israel and Palestine demonstrates the role of overlapping racial and religious identities in shaping how travelers understand their experiences in the Holy Land variously as traditional religious pilgrimage, tourism, and political engagement. While traditional accounts of pilgrimage frame it as an experience set apart from mundane realities and social hierarchies, new perspectives in the study of pilgrimage show how the social identities of travelers may shape religiously inspired travel. Four case studies of African American Christian travel to Palestine and Israel—including Christian Zionist and Palestinian solidarity tours—show how participant experiences and interpretations of sites are shaped by overlapping religious and racial collective identities, which affect the religious, economic, and political perceptions of travelers. The relevance of race to pilgrimage varies depending on past experiences of racial and religious histories, perceptions of racial injustice, race-specific theologies, and religious ethics. Solidarities with resident Israelis and Palestinians are encouraged or rejected depending on participant interpretations of overlapping racial and religious identities.

**Keywords:** pilgrimage; Palestine; Israel; Holy Land; race; religion; Christian Zionism; black churches; African American religion; collective identity



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## 1. Walking Where Jesus Walked and Walking Where Jesus Is Walking Today

In 2016, I accompanied a leadership group from the Black Pentecostal Church of God in Christ (COGIC) denomination for what was described as the organization's First International Conference in Israel. The delegation was made up of a number of prominent COGIC leaders—including pastors, elders, music ministers, and missionary supervisors. For these Black charismatic Christian visitors representing COGIC—some in the Holy Land for the first time—the experience of walking and worshipping in the land of the Bible provided much of the motivation for the trip. One site that came to hold special significance for the women on the trip, in particular, was the Magdala archeological park and chapel, near the Sea of Galilee. Described as “a crossroads of Jewish and Christian History” and a site that “exalts the presence of women in the Gospel”, Magdala held a special place in the experiences of many of the trip participants after some of the music ministers in the group led a spontaneous worship time in the chapel (Duc In Altum 2022).

Following that site visit, when I asked Maddaline Norfleet, a COGIC missionary supervisor, how her day was going, she told me, “I’m still in Magdala . . . To me that was it”. Later, she told me more about herself and her three-generation COGIC family lineage, going back almost a century. Describing the significance of traveling to the Holy Land for her and her fellow COGIC travelers, Norfleet said, “We believe in the Bible. We believe in the history there in Israel as it is depicted in the Bible. So, it always comes alive for us. And you saw how we totally embodied the whole spirit of the Israelis. We became emotional in certain places”. “When we went to Magdala,” she continued, “and we began to sing . . . we were no longer tourists. We were absolute worshippers. We felt like we were home. We felt so much a part of that. It was like we became a part of the fabric of Israel”. Continuing to describe times on the trip when she felt overcome with emotion, Norfleet added:

When we were looking over Nazareth, the same thing happened. We began to just tell the story . . . And so many people were having so many different emotions. Some people were emotional about looking out over the city of Nazareth. This is where Jesus looked. You know, to think this is where he *was*, this is what he *said*.

After returning home, she elaborated on the significance of that experience for her, as a Black Christian woman from the United States:

For us, as Black people, many times that was thought of as a dream. That's something somebody else got to do. You had to live it through somebody else. You had to embrace it as somebody else's dream that maybe you would never do. My mom, who is now 86 years old, is living her dream through me . . . She never left this area. She was born here. Her parents came from North Carolina. When they settled here, that was that. It was like, "Praise God, we're out of North Carolina! We're in Connecticut. That's the Promised Land for us".

She went on to describe traveling to Israel as a dream that her parents and grandparents could not have even imagined. "Many of us were seeing it and crying, not because we were seeing it, but we felt that everybody in us was seeing it". For Maddaline Norfleet, travel to Israel and Palestine as "the Holy Land" was about personally walking where Jesus walked and carrying the memories and dreams of ancestors who could never have dreamed of making that trip themselves, bringing to the surface profound personal layers of meaning linking religious and racial identity.

Earlier that year, I met another Black church leader who had recently traveled to Palestine and Israel and who similarly told me about the overlapping significance of her racial and religious identities as they informed her travel to the Holy Land. At the annual meeting of the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference (SDPC)—a progressive network of Black clergy, activists, and lay church leaders—Neichelle Guidry preached a sermon during an evening plenary session, reflecting on her recent experience on a Proctor-sponsored delegation of clergy to Israel and Palestine. In that sermon, she explicitly rejected the idea that she and her fellow travelers had journeyed to the Holy Land on a traditional pilgrimage:

No, we did not go to Palestine on some traditional Christian pilgrimage. Rather, we were sent to survey the land, to open our eyes and our ears and to see the struggle of our Brown brothers and sisters in and through the holy city of Jerusalem and throughout the West Bank. Through the course of our visit to Palestinian villages, refugee camps, and homes, I was baptized by fire into a deep melancholic aching of awakensness of the global oppression of Black and Brown bodies. And into a greater understanding of the interconnectedness of our stories and our struggles.

Guidry does not reject the spiritual imperative of traveling to Palestine and Israel altogether, but reframes it in terms of a religious ethic apart from "walking where Jesus walked". She further explained:

No, we did not go to the "Holy Land" to walk in the sanctified footsteps of a whitewashed Jesus and lay our hands on the place where he wept in the Garden of Gethsemane. We did not go under the guise of being good Christian Zionist pilgrims, who unquestionably sow our dollars into the occupation of people who look just like us. No, we went to see about our people, to learn about what they are facing on a day-to-day basis, and just how they are holding their lives, their families, their spirits, and their humanities together.

This motivation for the journey, Guidry later explained to me, came after an earlier trip to Israel and Palestine while she was in seminary. Reflecting on that earlier trip, she said: "I think that there was a lot of care taken to tailor my experience there and to curate it in such a way where I didn't really get an eye for the occupation . . . I was pretty sheltered . . . So, my first experience in Israel was somewhat of a Zionist experience".

What Guidry describes here as a *sheltered* or *curated* pilgrimage experience, another Black clergy affiliate of the Proctor Conference identifies as a tendency among American Christian Holy Land pilgrims to travel through the land unaware of the political realities and inequalities experienced by the people of the land. “[You’re] immediately confronted by these pilgrims that are walking around and having a religious experience,” he said. “You are just well aware that they have no idea—*have no idea*—what’s happening right in front of them . . . And if it’s not for me or someone else telling them to look up at that settlement right there, they wouldn’t see it”.

These critiques of traditional Christian pilgrimages to the Holy Land to “walk where Jesus walked” echo the sentiments of Bishop Don Williams, who helped bring the Palestinian issue to the attention of the Proctor Conference and to leaders like Guidry. Reflecting on his visits to Palestine and Israel, Williams wrote:

When I came back from my two trips to the West Bank, I was asked by many of my friends what it felt like to walk where Jesus walked. I told them it felt good to walk where Jesus walked but it felt even better to walk where Jesus is walking today and that is with those who are undervalued, underestimated and marginalized (Williams 2015).

The trope of “walking where Jesus walked”, then, is not rejected out of hand for African American Christian critics of traditional pilgrimage and Christian Zionist politics. It is rather reframed in asking: *Where is Jesus walking today?*

## 2. Collective Racial and Religious Identity on Pilgrimage

How should we understand these contrasting narratives—both drawing on African American Christian experiences, histories, and identities—in terms of their implications for analyzing contemporary pilgrimage to a site of traditional religious significance, such as Israel and Palestine? Maddaline Norfleet’s account of her motivations for traveling on a religiously inspired trip to the Holy Land include the personal significance of walking where Jesus walked, in overlapping racial and religious terms. Neichelle Guidry’s account similarly speaks to overlapping racial and religious reasons for traveling to the Holy Land, but does so in ways that include an awareness of the politics of pilgrimage and that prioritizes the more mundane lived experiences of Palestinians over traditional spiritual goals of religious travel.

Classical accounts of pilgrimage in the study of religion tend to frame it as an experience distant or set-apart from the mundane aspects of life—like accounts by Turner and Turner (1978) and Mircea Eliade (1959). Functionalist accounts of pilgrimage as a social phenomenon have built on the work of Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss to interpret pilgrimage as a means to build solidarity at the level of ethnic groups, nations, or tribes (Coleman and Elsner 1991). However, in the above narratives, African American Christians variously bring overlapping racial and religious identities, histories, and experiences to bear on conceptualizing and interpreting their religiously inspired travels to “the Holy Land” of Palestine and Israel in ways that raise questions about the limits of these approaches.

These limits have been well-documented over the past several decades. Summarizing the development of pilgrimage studies, Simon Coleman (2021) suggests that explaining the significance of pilgrimage in the world today requires attention to both what happens at the center of sacred sites and also what happens at the periphery of such sites. If the well-worn pilgrimage routes in the Old City of Jerusalem are the center, we might think of Guidry’s account of refugee camps as the periphery. Coleman further describes pilgrimage as a form of embodied historiography—“a reconstituting of history that can be done through ritual acts and material objects as well as through words” (7). The ostensibly mundane becomes essential to the sacred itself, and it becomes untenable to conceptualize pilgrimage exclusively in terms of an experience of the sacred, set apart from the mundane aspects of human social life—such as economics and politics. Where earlier accounts of pilgrimage have emphasized the set-apart nature of travel to holy sites, successive analyses have emphasized the need for a more sociological approach to the study of pilgrimage that

considers wider social factors that structure pilgrimage experiences, revealing pilgrimage as a “polymorphic phenomenon” (Sallnow 1981), and an anthropological approach that understands the ritual significance of sacred travel and incorporates attention to the role of the aspects of human experiences away from sacred sites (or at their margins) that shape ostensibly sacred journeys to the center (Eade and Sallnow 1991).

Pilgrimage journeys are complex religious and social phenomena, where the significance of the ostensibly mundane and the marginal aspects of traveler identities can come to bear on their experiences of places traditionally thought of primarily as sacred centers. Attention to the relationship between religious and racial identities within African American Christian trips to the Holy Land—and how they shape participant understandings of the tensions between religious, economic, and political facets of pilgrimage—represents one pathway to understanding the broader social significance of religiously inspired travel. While ethnographic accounts of pilgrimage experiences at traditional sites of religious significance remain important in this framework, attending to the overlapping significance of racial and religious identities as a part of the kind of “embodied historiography” that Coleman describes takes on added significance. I argue that the salience of race in the context of pilgrimage is mutable. At times, racial identity comes to the forefront and guides engagement with questions of religious meaning and global political solidarities. At other times, the salience of race gives way to more universal religious values and aspects of individual and group identity, which can open up alternative solidarities. Four case studies of African American Christian travel to Israel and Palestine show how the experience of such trips depends on racially specific orientations to religion and politics, which take shape long before pilgrimage journeys are undertaken. African American experiences of the Holy Land reflect existing identities and constituent configurations of religion and politics. But they also provide opportunities for reevaluating and reconfiguring the significance of those identities, where the experience of the land provokes novel interpretations of Black religious politics on less familiar terms.

The Holy Land of Palestine and Israel becomes an important site of connection between the more familiar landscape of Black American religiosity and political engagement in the United States and the wider space of global political solidarities. For African American Christian travelers, the land is a global site in the Black American religious imaginary, and a place where the national–global connection is realized and formed. It is also a place where competing dispositions towards Black religious politics are contested—sometimes through a sort of trial and error, as various stakeholders compete to define trip priorities and to impose an overall outlook on the Israeli–Palestinian situation. These competing priorities and corresponding outlooks sometimes mesh with existing religious–political sensibilities that African American Christian travelers bring with them, but at other times they clash.

I compare the experiences of African American Christians on two types of tours: (1) Christian Zionist tours that tend to emphasize explicitly religious purposes for pilgrimage through tourism and add opportunities to build political solidarity with Jewish Israelis; (2) tours that prioritize seeking out connections with Palestinians and involvement with the Palestinian struggle, which tend to downplay traditional notions of pilgrimage and avoid tourism in favor of more overt political and social engagement. For the former, religious identity is often at the forefront of their experiences, and racial identity is relegated as secondary, as universal Christian experiences dominate meaning making on the trip. For African American Christian Zionist travelers, possibilities for emergent political solidarities arise via the attention given to Black–Jewish connections and racial diversity among Israeli Jews. Conversely, for the latter—African American Christians more focused on Palestinians—the particular significance of racial identity often takes precedence over the traditional (and ostensibly universal) religious significance of the Holy Land. In these cases, the metaphor of an “unholy land” becomes more apt, and traditional notions of religious pilgrimage and accompanying Zionist narratives are cast as “whitewashed” experiences of the land, as the reflection of Neichelle Guidry above suggests. In attending to the complexities of Holy Land travel for a wide range of African American Christians, I demonstrate

the many ways that overlapping racial and religious identities affect and are affected by travel to Israel and Palestine—including through intersecting religious, ethical, economic, and political factors that shape participant expectations, experiences, and striving for an authentic encounter with the Holy Land and its people.

### 3. Pilgrimage Studies: From Pious Travel to Tourism to Political Activism

In 2014, the United Nations World Tourism Organization estimated that 300–330 million travelers visit one of the world’s key religious sites each year (UNWTO 2014). These well-traveled destinations have traditionally been studied as sacred or holy places to which pilgrims undertake religiously inspired and primarily spiritually oriented journeys. In their classical anthropological analysis of pilgrimage, Turner and Turner (1978) suggest that the social significance of pilgrimage is characterized by liminal social relations, outside of the bureaucracy and regularity of mundane social life. These liminal relations are evidenced by the ambiguity of social positions and a sense of *communitas*, where a particular kind of homogeneity and comradeship are possible in ways that hierarchical social structures elsewhere preclude. Victor Turner (1973) also describes pilgrimage as aimed at experiencing the “center out there”, away from the constraints of everyday social life. For the Turners, pilgrimage sites create spaces for “ritual inversions” of social life for participants (Di Giovine 2013). In another classical formulation of pilgrimage, the scholar of comparative religions Mircea Eliade (1959) argues that pilgrimage sites are *axes mundi*—points of connection between heaven and earth where the sacred interrupts the mundane. While diverging in their overall interpretation of pilgrimage sites and pilgrimage processes, the Turners and Eliade both emphasize the transcendent aspects of pilgrimage and the extent to which such journeys take participants out of their everyday lives and into a closer experience of the sacred.

In recent decades, scholars of pilgrimage have pointed out that such frameworks impose a problematic kind of homogeneity on pilgrimage as a social phenomenon ostensibly set apart from secular, economic, and political concerns. In response, new paradigms in pilgrimage studies have included increased attention paid to the wider social, political, and economic significance of pilgrimage travel. Eade and Sallnow (1991) conclude that earlier studies of pilgrimage tend to take for granted the meaning of pilgrimage for participants, ignoring the ways that pilgrimage functions as a “realm of competing discourses”, where sacred and secular concerns are thoroughly enmeshed. Similarly, Glenn Bowman (1993) describes pilgrimage as a site of *multivocality*, where multiple interests and interpretations converge. Elsewhere, using the example of pilgrimage to Jerusalem, Bowman (1991) argues that all pilgrimages are constructed discursively through processes whereby “the center” of the faith becomes connected to the broader lives and communities of pilgrims. Further, Coleman and Eade (2004, 2018) emphasize the extent to which contemporary pilgrimage is shaped by processes of political economy, migration patterns, diasporic identities, and transnational politics. Expanding this paradigm, Coleman (2021) develops a view of pilgrimage that not only theorizes the act of travel to, from, and around sacred spaces, but that further includes a profound consideration of the relationship between such experiences of the sacred and the “ordinary” times, places, and practices of pilgrims. These recognitions draw studies of contemporary pilgrimages away from that which is recognized as “officially sacred” (Di Giovine and Choe 2019), and into a wider appreciation for the extent to which pilgrimages are always sites of tension between secular and religious discourses.

Widening studies of pilgrimage have also accounted for the many ways that politics interact with religious motivations and tourism related to pilgrimage. Of Israel and Palestine, scholars have noted the political ramifications and complexities of (particularly American) Christian travel to the land (Belhassen and Ebel 2009; Cohn-Sherbok 2006; Feldman 2011; Hutt 2014; Kaell 2014; Smith 2013). Politicized aspects pilgrimage—in Israel and Palestine, and elsewhere—invoke notions of “political tourism” (Moynagh 2008), “activist tourism” (Shinnamon 2010), “volunteer tourism” (Benson 2010), “dark tourism” (Isaac 2022), “ecotourism” (Fennell 2008), and “journeys to the margins” (Williams 2020). Further,

for most of its history as a pilgrimage destination, “the Holy Land” of Israel and Palestine has also been a site for religious proselytizing (Kaell 2014; Kidd 2009; Makdisi 2009; Vogel 1993). Scholars of race and diasporic identity have also increasingly paid attention to the significance of collective racial, ethnic, and national identities in studies of tourism and pilgrimage (Schramm 2004; Thomas 2014; Tweed 1997), building on longstanding attention to ethnicity and the meaning of ethnic identity in tourism studies (van den Berghe and Keyes 1984).

In this context, scholars of religiously inspired travel—whether under the rubric of pilgrimage, tourism, or political activism—have shown how making and deploying social and cultural meanings are essential parts of such travel. As noted above, Coleman (2021) suggests pilgrimage as a kind of embodied historiography, suggesting a deep investment in meaning-making for participants that extends beyond the formal aspects of pilgrimage travel. Similarly, for Shaul Kelner (2010), tourism is likewise about ways of knowing and relating to place. More specifically, it is “a specific genre of travel, in which individuals construct meaning through the consumption of place” (9). For Vida Bajc (2006), pilgrimage—especially to contested sites like Palestine and Israel—is a process where religious and historical memory are interlaced, and competing narratives are performed by spiritual leaders and secular tour guides, linking the religious and the economic. As meaning-laden places, pilgrimage destinations such as Jerusalem are religious landscapes created by spiritual imaginaries. But within these landscapes of pilgrimage, the inputs of tourism economies and political struggles over territory, resources, and recognition open up studies of pilgrimage to concerns about commodification—in terms of morality (Williams 2020), spirituality (Kaell 2014), and identity (Becker 2015; White 2005). Furthermore, related questions about authenticity further draw out how tourists and pilgrims alike aim for and pursue what they perceive to be genuine experiences of *the real* destination (MacCannell 1973, 1976). The pilgrim/tourist plays a part in shaping their own experiences, but so do other stakeholders, such as professional tour guides (Feldman 2016; Wynn 2011).

These processes that shape pilgrim experiences—including elements of tourism and political activism—begin with deeply held collective memories that travelers bring with them. Maurice Halbwachs [1925] (Halbwachs [1925] 1992) argues that religious travelers to the Holy Land bring with them an imagined collective memory of the land that they carry with them as they set out on pilgrimage, though they may have never been to the land before. This collective memory, then, becomes overlaid onto the site of pilgrimage itself, giving meaning to the material place and taking meaning from it. Pilgrims, in other words, “look for places that will make [their] beliefs come alive” (Bajc 2006, p. 102). For the African American Christian travelers in this study, collective memory carries important racial significance in Israel and Palestine, as contemporary African American Christian pilgrims to the Holy Land carry and invoke legacies of Black–Jewish (Chireau and Deutsch 2000; Dorman 2013) and Afro–Arab (Feldman 2015; Fischbach 2018; Lubin 2014) spiritual connections and political solidarities.

We see collective memories invoked in the opening vignettes above. For Maddaline Norfleet, the experience of the Holy Land is set up and mediated by the emotional weight of doing something that her African American ancestors only dreamed of. For Neichelle Guidry, other racial collective memories of struggle against injustice preclude a purely spiritual encounter with the land. Instead, they set up a *baptism by fire* aimed at political *awakeness* as the authentic outcome of travel in Palestine and Israel, motivated by an awareness of Black history, collective identity, and transnational political solidarity. Collective memories, material and embodied experiences of the land, and racialized subjectivities are all contested aspects of contemporary African American Christian travel to Israel and Palestine. Because of this, even the seemingly basic notion of “walking where Jesus walked” comes to mean very different things to different travelers, who bring divergent experiences and understandings of African American religious and political history to Holy Land encounters. For some, traditional pilgrimage sites provide the context for an authentic religious experience of the land—even when operated as tourist sites with economic incen-

tives. For others, authenticity demands avoiding an overly touristic pilgrimage path and pursuing an alternative agenda.

#### 4. Research Methods and Data

This analysis of pilgrimage draws on five years of fieldwork (2013–2018) in the world of African American Christian engagement with Palestine and Israel. This fieldwork included four trips to the Holy Land with different groups of African American Christians and different sponsoring organizations. These include the COGIC delegation described above, a National Baptist Convention of America (NBCA) leadership delegation, a group from The Perfecting Church (TPC), and a group led by a member of the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference (SDPC). The COGIC leadership delegation was an independently organized trip, building on a previous tour organized and sponsored by the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews (IFCJ)—an American and Israeli Jewish philanthropic organization. The NBCA trip was also organized, sponsored, and led by the IFCJ. The Perfecting Church is an independent Black evangelical congregation in the southern New Jersey suburbs of Philadelphia, which regularly leads small groups of its members on service trips to Bethlehem in the West Bank to work with Palestinians. The trip led by the Proctor Conference affiliate was a tour for young African American activists and others, organized in partnership with the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center in Palestine, under the title “Diaspora Dialogues”. Each trip I accompanied lasted between seven and fourteen days, and included at least some exposure to the State of Israel and to the Palestinian Territories (West Bank). During each trip, I traveled and stayed with the groups as a participant observer. I conducted informal interviews throughout each trip and recorded pre-trip and follow-up interviews with some participants.

I also draw on additional fieldwork in the United States, where interest in Israel and Palestine among African American Christians is initially sought and cultivated—including recruitment and preparation for the trips I accompanied. This fieldwork included attending upwards of thirty events in seven states, including church services, conferences, Bible studies, pastoral training events, college campus meetings, workshops, and pre- and post-trip meetings. I conducted 90 recorded semi-structured interviews with 79 different participants, 66 of which had traveled to Palestine and Israel on a trip I accompanied or another trip.

#### 5. Seeking out Authenticity

The travelers I followed and interviewed in this study were variously concerned with pursuing authentic experiences of Israel and Palestine. But their ideas about what constituted an authentic experience varied significantly, in part guided by their theologies, their racial politics, and their collective identities. For African American Christian Zionists, questions of authenticity often revolved around seeing and experiencing the places where the events of the Bible “actually happened”, learning about “the real Israel”, and taking home authentic souvenirs—like Jewish prayer shawls, small antiquities, and other objects that marked and memorialized their journeys. But it was also about building relationships and spiritual solidarities with Israeli Jews—especially Black Ethiopian Jews. For those traveling with a mandate to encounter and learn about the plight of Palestinians, the quest for authenticity typically involved eschewing traditional holy sites in favor of solidarity-building and engagement with Palestinians in the West Bank.

Among the locations where the authenticity and verifiability of biblical place was paramount was the pilgrim baptism site in the Jordan River. Many (especially Protestant) Christian pilgrims to the Holy Land get baptized (or re-baptized) at a site near where the Jordan River flows out of the Sea of Galilee outside of the city of Tiberias. For a fee, visitors are provided with a white robe, a towel, and access to showers and dressing rooms. Videos of the baptism experience can also be purchased in the central gift shop, along with bottles of Jordan River water, t-shirts, and other commemorative items, souvenirs, and

gifts. On the National Baptist Convention of America (NBCA) pastor's delegation that I accompanied, one Louisiana pastor described the significance of his baptism experience:

It was absolutely awesome for me . . . When I put on the baptism gown to go into the water, I just remembered thinking about scripture saying when he was baptized and the heavens opened and behold the voice of the Lord. You could hear him saying, "This is my beloved son. In him I am well pleased". And I thought about, when I walked into the water and I felt it, and I said wow, this is a great experience. That I know Jesus—in whom I trust and I believe in—was in this water.

That this particular bend in the Jordan River had been developed into an expansive commercial tourist operation mattered little to the many visitors whom I watched don baptism robes and come out of the water with tears in their eyes, having experienced Christian baptism not only in the manner of Jesus' baptism but in its specific place. It did not matter—probably because, as visitors, we were not told—that the river's waters are only accessible there because of twentieth century hydroelectric dams and water diversion projects. In the minds of those being baptized, this was an authentic biblical place that they could see, touch, and experience directly.

But not all those I traveled with wanted this particular version of the baptism experience. During the limited touring and travel time that The Perfecting Church (TPC) group took away from their primary goal of meeting and engaging with Palestinians, we took a day trip from Bethlehem to the Galilee area. While we visited the shores of the Sea of Galilee, several members of the trip talked about looking forward to getting the chance to be baptized in the Jordan River that day. As we drove past the popular baptism site described above, TPC's founding pastor, Kevin Brown, commented that this site was overly commercialized and "touristy". He favored a quieter site further south along the Jordan Valley, he said, with a religious aesthetic more conducive to a peaceful baptism experience like the one that Jesus experienced in the Gospels. However, we arrived at that alternate baptism site just as it was closing and were turned around at the entrance gate. As we made a U-turn and we continued on our way back to our hotel in Bethlehem, disappointment filled the bus and the members of the trip that were particularly looking forward to being baptized in the Jordan expressed frustration at having come so far only to be denied that experience for arriving ten minutes too late. I thought of this on later trips that I accompanied, as I watched large groups of pastors and pilgrims glowing at the experience of baptism in the waters of the Jordan—in spite of what might have been commercial distractions at the location to which their tour guides took them. These pilgrims came away from their trip to the Holy Land with the experience of baptism, while the members of The Perfecting Church had not shared in that experience because they pursued an alternative authentic baptism experience, only to be turned away.

While a re-baptism experience in the Jordan was variously sought out for these Christian Zionist and Palestine-focused African American travelers, the Diaspora Dialogues group I traveled with was significantly less interested in traditional holy sites of any kind, emphasizing opportunities for visiting sites of political significance and meeting with activists in the land. For example, our tour of Jerusalem took us past the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, which our guide noted, yet we only visited the exterior courtyard briefly and did not enter the church itself. Similarly, in Bethlehem, we made a short stop at the Church of the Nativity and some members of the group went inside briefly, but others stayed outside and waited. In group conversations throughout the trip, several participants reflected on their impressions that the few traditional sites of religious significance that we encountered felt like the least holy places in the land. This, they explained, was due to their overcrowdedness, their obvious commercialization, and the kinds of interactions they had with other tourist-pilgrims in those spaces. For example, the trip's Black clergywoman leader had an unpleasant run in with an older white man in the crowded Old City of Jerusalem, near the Holy Sepulcher, when he spit in her direction—an act interpreted as an obvious racial aggression among all of the Black and Brown members of the group. Participants

described these exposures to crowded traditional holy sites as the least meaningful and least authentic aspects of the trip. This was in contrast with more mundane and spontaneous encounters—like being invited into the home of a Palestinian family in the Old City of Jerusalem threatened by eviction, or getting particularly friendly service in various Palestinian restaurants and businesses. While visits to holy sites were experienced as places of aggression and commercialization, everyday encounters provided a more mundane kind of authenticity through connections with Palestinians living under occupation that the Diaspora Dialogues group sought out. When conversations with local activists turned to the significance of holy sites in the land, they typically focused on inequalities in the free expression of religion for Palestinians due to restrictions on mobility and travel.

Building on this preliminary and comparative account of the many ways that various African American Christian visitors to Palestine and Israel think about what it means to experience the Holy Land in an authentic way—across possibilities and pitfalls linking tourism, religious experiences of tradition holy sites, and encounters of politics in the everyday—the following sections further elaborate the tensions between these priorities on Christian Zionist and Palestinian solidarity-focused tours. Across these cases, I show how multiple interpretations, expressions, and embodiments of African American Christianity—including collective identities and related stances on religious politics—significantly shape, constrain, and guide experiences of the Holy Land in ways that can push scholars of pilgrimage to recognize the many ways that the mundane interrupts and intersects with ostensibly sacred travel.

## 6. Race, Religion, and Politics on African American Palestinian Solidarity Tours

As described above, affiliates of the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference embrace the political aspects of visiting Israel and Palestine, drawing on expressions of politically aware Black liberation theologies and bringing such theological reflection to bear on transnational solidarity-building, rooted in religious reflection and aimed at social action. Proctor leaders, like Neichelle Guidry above, suggest that typical pilgrim experiences of the land actually interfere with seeing Palestine and Israel through the lens of justice. They offer a prophetic Black religious voice that reframes pilgrimage as an opportunity to advance justice as a religious imperative. Proctor leader Jeremiah Wright, speaking to a Proctor Conference gathering of Black clergy, castigated Christian Zionists tours offered to African American Christians, saying:

They take students from HBCUs [Historically Black Colleges and Universities] and Black congregations—pastors and members—to the State of Israel, so they become the number one Star of David flag wavers for the biggest land grab since we stole this land from the Native Americans . . . “Don’t you wanna see where Jesus was baptized? Don’t you wanna be baptized in the Jordan?” . . . They’re not gonna show you Gaza. They’re not gonna show you the West Bank. They’re not gonna show you what’s on the other side of the wall—the Apartheid wall that they’re building . . . “Come see where Jesus was born,” [they say].

In this vein, the Diaspora Dialogues trip was described as a “sojourn” and a “global immersion encounter”. As such, the trip was intended to “help bridge gaps between cultural, spiritual and even intergenerational intersections . . . upholding the core pillars of leadership, education, advocacy and discourse”. The ten-day trip focused on visiting sites of political significance in the context of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Jerusalem. For example, we visited a depopulated Palestinian village, a refugee camp, military checkpoints, the site of an Israeli prison for Palestinians, and the South African Representative Office in Ramallah. Where Christian Zionist tours of the State of Israel focus extensively on religious geographies (“the Land of Israel”, “the Land of the Bible”), our attention was always directed towards the political geography of the land—with respect to the location of Jewish settlements in the West Bank, road networks, as well as the Israeli separation barrier and its implications for the daily lives of Palestinians. In briefings with activists, human rights workers, and community organizers, we were presented with

narratives about the challenges faced among Palestinians due to the unequal distribution of public resources and the impact of Israeli policies on Palestinian communities. Participants found deep meaning in these educational and activist-oriented experiences, embracing opportunities to broaden their political awareness through identifying parallel structures of racism and colonialism linking the Middle East and North America.

The Perfecting Church (TPC) likewise understands its mandate in the land as centered on connecting with and engaging Palestinians. For founding pastors Kevin and Angela Brown, Israel and Palestine are the church's global focus. Kevin Brown told me about his mentor's challenge to "pick a hard place in the world" and to go work there with his congregation. Initially, this meant starting TPC as a new congregation in South New Jersey, but it eventually came to include Bethlehem and the West Bank, after Brown attended a Palestinian Christian-led conference in Bethlehem in 2012. Since then, Brown has returned once or twice per year with small teams of TPC members, focused on peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts. I accompanied TPC's fall 2015 visit, about which Brown emphasized to the group: "We're not going on a Holy Land tour. That's not what this is. We're not going as tourists. We're not going as missionaries. We're going to engage the domains of society". He went on to talk about engagement with Palestinians and Israelis as an effort to bring reconciliation between Christians, Muslims, and Jews in the land. This mandate also included a warning against "taking sides" by getting too involved in politics. "We are not taking a position," Brown explained. "We're taking the same position that Jesus took and that is the cross. We're not picking a side. We wanna love our neighbors". For Brown, African American Christians are in a unique position to be a bridge between Israelis and Palestinians, based on their understanding and experience of oppression and racism. So, for TPC members and leaders, this was the driving religious impetus of the trip—one that superseded visiting traditional holy sites and tourism experiences.

However, some members of the group—especially those visiting the Holy Land for the first time—expressed a desire to spend more time encountering the land of the Bible that they had imagined since a young age and that informed their spirituality as African American Christians. One TPC member spent many evenings during the trip in our Bethlehem hotel watching the 1977 Franco Zeffirelli miniseries *Jesus of Nazareth* on his laptop, which he said he had grown up watching and which had spurred his young imagination about the Bible. "I'm a very visual type of person," he said. "So, what particularly made [the trip] more enjoyable for me was growing up as a very young kid watching *Jesus of Nazareth*, I would say, a million times". Echoing Kevin Brown's framing of the trip, he told me, "We're not going on a Holy Land tour". But an experience of the land of the Bible was a significant part of his motivation in traveling with TPC to the Holy Land. All participants acknowledged that they were not on a Holy Land tour and adjusted their expectations accordingly. But several voiced interest in visiting sites of biblical significance, and later their disappointment when some were taken off the schedule—like a cancelled visit to the Old City of Jerusalem. Experiencing the land of the Bible and "walking where Jesus walked" held a meaningful place in the spiritual imaginaries of these visitors, even as they were asked to prioritize more mundane experiences of meeting and getting to know Palestinians in the course of their daily lives, away from the tourism industry.

Politics was also a pull for many participants on the trip, who tended to interpret Palestinian experiences in the land as parallel to their own experiences of racism and racial inequality in the United States. Kevin Brown noted, "Our churches have shaped us to be Zionists. And when we get our feet on the ground, I think we'd be shocked how quickly we would relate to the Palestinian rather than the Israeli". One female TPC member, visiting Palestine and Israel for the first time, observed, "The Palestinians are an oppressed people . . . They lack freedom to go, and to come, and to do . . . . And so that's very much African American. We were oppressed". With such recognitions of inequalities in the land, the everyday experiences of TPC's African American members were constantly shaping their impressions and experiences of the Holy Land. While we were driving through Jerusalem, one TPC member spotted a Palestinian teenager on a bicycle being questioned

by an Israeli police officer. “It’s just like the States,” she said, shaking her head. “You can really see the parallels,” another added. Aware of the tendency of his Black church members to identify with Palestinians on the basis of parallel experiences of racism, Kevin Brown works to resist the pull of these familiar experiences towards the politics of the region. “Much like I’ve worked on as not choosing a side,” he said, “I’ve worked on as not getting politically involved . . . I don’t feel that’s our assignment there”. While affirming an ostensibly apolitical mandate in the land, Angela Brown was ambivalent, “*I am* named after Angela Davis,” she told me, “so I’m ready to put my fist in the air often and tell the world about the injustices that I see”. But, she added, “I have to remind myself not to choose sides. Choose the cross”. Angela Brown is emphasizing one narrative about the purpose of the TPC trip (reconciliation) over another (recognizing injustices). This reflects not just the presence of such competing narratives, but also the possibility of significant ambivalence shaping the interpretations of a single participant or a group of travelers.

Both the Diaspora Dialogues group and The Perfecting Church group that I traveled with in Israel and Palestine experienced the Holy Land in ways that drew significantly on African American experiences of racism and racial inequality in the United States. Yet their orientations towards tourism, visiting holy sites, and ubiquitous opportunities to get involved with the politics of the land varied significantly with their outlooks on the salience of race and the political impetus of their Christian faiths. Embodying Black theologies of liberation in transnational terms in Palestine and Israel, the Diaspora Dialogues group sought out politics as an authentic expression of African American identity and Black religion in the land. They not only eschewed tourism as a distraction from that mandate, they tended to frame tourism and traditional pilgrimage in political terms, noting the role they play in the perpetuation of inequality for Palestinians. Members of the Perfecting Church represent a more evangelical expression of African American Christianity—shaped in part by connections to white-led organizations and congregations—that affirms their unique role in the Holy Land as bridge builders and reconcilers, not activists who “choose sides”.

### 7. Race, Religion, and Politics on African American Christian Zionist Tours

For the COGIC and NBCA travelers I accompanied on tours of Israel, appeals to universal Christian connections to the Holy Land tended to guide their spiritual imaginaries and embodied experiences of the land, as outlined in the opening vignette above. One female COGIC music leader—in Israel for her third time—described the experience of returning to the Holy Land as refueling for ministry:

For me, it was an opportunity to enrich myself once again . . . to just be in that environment, to let it soak into my spiritual pores, so that I come back and I exude the authentic mindset of God . . . And so, for me, it’s a filling station. It’s the ability to learn and to glean so much more than what I know, because every time I go, I learn something new. Then I’m able to come back and share that with the constituency that I’ve been placed over.

For this leader, the spiritually fulfilling aspect of the trip is expressed in universal terms, as opposed to in race-specific religious terms. Another female NBCA lay leader traveled to the Holy Land in search of specific healing and miracles. The most meaningful part of her trip, she told me, was standing in the Garden of Gethsemane—where Jesus spent his last night before being crucified—praying for her daughter suffering from cancer. “She has been on chemo daily for almost five years now . . . And I stood there at that garden and I prayed and asking the Lord that [she would become] cancer free”.

In prioritizing universal spiritual aspects of Holy Land travel—whether personal or corporate—African American Christian Zionist travelers also tended to downplay the significance of race in describing their motivations for traveling and in interpreting their experiences. One male NBCA pastor explained to me, “To me, the religious factor is more important than the racial factor . . . That the people of Israel [are] God’s chosen people and that’s where Jesus walked and all of that other stuff. That’s more important to me than the racial component”.

But there were times on the Christian Zionist tours that I accompanied where the significance of race and racial collective identity came to the surface, creating unexpected moments of meaning-making outside of the planned messaging of the guides and leaders. For example, both Christian Zionist tours emphasized connections with Ethiopian Jews on racial terms. But participants often noticed and pointed out that the living conditions of Ethiopian communities in the State of Israel were not as good as those of European-descended Jews. Of realizing this, Maddaline Norfleet told me: “It kind of hurt me a little bit, because I can see a stark difference in the living arrangements for the Ethiopians. The word ‘ghetto,’ I understand, comes from or was started in the Jewish community . . . And [the Ethiopians] are the ghetto of the ghetto . . . So, I felt bad for them”.

Another COGIC pastor was bothered when a Jewish tour guide took up an impromptu collection at the end of a visit to an Ethiopian Jewish absorption center. Sharing his frustrations over lunch that day, he said:

The whole trip was designed according to Ethiopians . . . So, you have to politick that piece, you have to market that piece . . . I’m coming to Israel to learn about Israel and that’s a good thing, but then I’m also coming because of the Ethiopian part, too. But you’re making me pay *my* money for *your* politics . . . I could have done without any of that . . . I came for Jesus. I came for the Holy Land experience—to see where he walked.

The assumed racial solidarity across religious lines that trip-leaders expected to lead to a willingness to support Christian Zionist politics seemed to fail when it was perceived to be oppositional to or at the expense of prioritizing the universal spiritual significance of the trip. Race was also salient for COGIC and NBCA pilgrims in terms of Black–Jewish solidarity more broadly. The same COGIC music minister who described Israel as a “filling station” explained that connection:

Being African American, for me, has a connectivity—I believe—to those of Jewish descent and here’s why. There is an innate sound that comes from those that have endured great duress, great struggle, and triumph . . . So, Africans and Jews—because of the great atrocities that they have been through—make a sound that is distinct. [It] comes from their music, [it] comes from their writings, it comes from the struggle.

The COGIC tour and the NBCA tour both included visits to the *Yad Vashem* Holocaust memorial, which spurred many members of both groups to talk about this African American–Jewish connection. Samuel Tolbert, President of the NBCA, told me, “I think race is important [to the trip] as it relates to Israel and African Americans because there are similar struggles of oppression”. Of visiting *Yad Vashem*, Maddaline Norfleet said, “[When] I went there, I went through my own African American history”. For many of those I traveled with and spoke to, the guiding impetus for traveling with their denominations to Israel was for the land’s spiritual significance. This spiritual emphasis was most often described in universal rather than racial terms. However, the significance of race entered the trip experience through visits to sites such as Ethiopian absorption centers and community organizations, as well as the Holocaust memorial.

Some travelers, who had been to Israel before, drew distinctions between what they understood as more apolitical religiously and spiritually oriented trips and what they described as the more educational nature of the trip that we shared, linking the Bible with politics. NBCA Vice President, Bartholomew Banks, told me:

The first time I went to Israel, I looked at it from the perspective of visiting the biblical sites and looking at it from that perspective from being an inspirational trip. This time it was more educational and enlightening in terms of what is actually happening today as related to them dealing with some of the same types of issues that they had as a result of bringing people back to the land, in addition to the real threat of them trying to re-establish themselves in something that was granted to them.

Banks' reflections show how Christian Zionist tours aim to link a spiritual affinity for the land of the Bible with the political project of Zionism. In doing so they attempt to build bridges between religion and politics on what many participants consider to be a primarily religious pilgrimage trip. This effort, however, was not always successful on the trips that I participated in. On the last day of the COGIC tour, the group met with a representative of the Knesset Christian Allies Caucus—an organization within the Israeli Knesset (Parliament), tasked with mobilizing Christian political support for the State of Israel. The representative emphasized “putting biblical support for Israel into political terms” through “faith-based diplomacy”. When he circulated a political petition on the importance of maintaining Jerusalem as the unified and undivided capital of the State of Israel, a few of COGIC members signed it, but most did not. As we left that presentation, one pastor on the trip said to me, “That seemed like a *political* document to me”. When I asked him if he had signed the petition, he said, “Oh no! I try to stay away from that. I know the leader and others signed it, but I try to stay away from politics”. Another trip participant later told me, “I thought that was very political. I didn't sign it. I think our covenant [with Israel] is spiritual . . . I think it's good that they have their land here, but God is going to do what God is going to do no matter what we do”. As with the above examples, the spiritual, here, is emphasized as the universal religious significance of the trip and juxtaposed to any political or secular purposes.

While many participants affirmed Black–Jewish connections and concern for the thriving of the State of Israel—in theological and political terms—in moments like this, efforts to translate a religious affinity for the land of the Bible into political support for the State of Israel and for Zionism often failed to connect with African American Christian Zionists, who understood their primary motivation for being in Israel as spiritual. Yet, participants did, at times, experience overlapping racial and religious collective identities that they felt were authentic—such as when Maddaline Norfleet was overcome with emotion at the thought of doing something her ancestors could have only dreamed of.

## 8. Discussion and Conclusions

Some African American Christians who take up religiously motivated travel to Israel and Palestine do so prioritizing traditional goals of pilgrimage—including walking where Jesus walked and experiencing the land of the Bible or “the Holy Land”. They do so largely unencumbered by the mundane economic realities of the tourism industries that scaffold and mediate experiences of the sacred geography of the Holy Land. For such travelers, it is more likely to be diversions into the politics of the region that interrupt or compete with their religious priorities in the land. Others reject these pilgrimage ambitions and accompanying tourism industries in favor of a reframed religious ethic motivating their travel to the land to engage with politics and/or to build relationships and solidarities with Palestinians. Across both of these stances on Holy Land travel as religious pilgrimage, participants invoked personal and collective racial and religious identities and histories that significantly shaped their expectations, their interpretations of their experiences, and their sense of what it means to them to embody and live out those identities on a pilgrimage. For African American Christian Zionists, traditional religious notions of pilgrimage as a journey to the center combine with political priorities relating the Black–Jewish solidarities and support for the policies of the State of Israel. At times, these priorities coalesce, and at times they clash.

Most of the participants I met on Christian Zionist tours embraced religious priorities related to experiencing the Holy Land as the sacred site of the origins of their faith. But they did so in ways that incorporated African American Christian experiences from their lives at home in the United States, especially as they reflected on the significance of representing their churches, their families, and their denominations in the Holy Land. Racial and religious identities—far from being mundane realities set aside on pilgrimage—significantly shaped their embodied experiences of the land, and guided their understanding of what it meant for them to pursue authentic experiences of the land of the Bible in Palestine and

Israel. These shaped their understanding of the meaning of being in a “Holy Land” in personal and communal terms.

For the participants I traveled with who prioritized encountering the lived realities of Palestinians in the land, religious motivations varied more than on the Christian Zionist tours. Affiliates of the Samuel DeWitt Proctor conference eschewed traditional notions of pilgrimage, and even the notion that the land was a “Holy Land” at all. For them, attention to the mundane experiences of Palestinians in the context of occupation meant purposely avoiding well-trod pathways of Holy Land pilgrimage and Israeli tourism industries. In this formulation of the significance of travel to Israel and Palestine, the land is rather “unholy” in terms of the injustices that Palestinians experience, which are seen to mirror and interlace with those of Black and Brown people around the world. For members of The Perfecting Church, prioritizing engagement with Palestinians took a different register, as reconciliation, bridge-building, and peacemaking were emphasized by their pastor. Yet these efforts were complicated by the religious imaginaries—of first-time visitors especially—and by experiences and observations that evoked a recognition of parallels between African American and Palestinian experiences of racism and discrimination.

Across all of these cases, attention to participant motivations, varieties of embodied experiences, and the multiple pathways for meaning-making that emerge upon travel to Palestine and Israel show how relevant collective identities are to understanding what pilgrimage is and how pilgrimage processes unfold in sites of traditional religious significance. While studies of pilgrimage have long highlighted how religious collective identities shape pilgrimage experiences, attention to other kinds of collective identities—such as race and nationality—opens up analyses of pilgrimage in the modern world.

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