CHAPTER NINE

PILGRIMAGE TO THE SPAS IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN DURING THE LATER ROMAN AND BYZANTINE PERIODS

From the time Christianity became the predominant religion, from the fourth century CE on, the Holy Land was a desired destination of travelers and pilgrims from countries around the globe. Indeed, from the early existence of the Christian religion, pilgrimage occupied a central place in the religious conception of the Christian. It should be seen as a spontaneous phenomenon of popular faith that fulfilled an emotional need for the pilgrim rather than as part of the established religion. Christian pilgrimage is a kind of active fulfillment of the Christian recognition of the temporariness of man’s existence in this world. The Latin term for pilgrim is \textit{peregrinus}, which implies a stranger, a wayfarer.

In the Byzantine period, Jerusalem became the most important centre for pilgrimage for Christians and the archetype of pilgrimage to the holy places in general as it had been for the Jews in the past.\footnote{Newton (1926): 39–66; Wilkinson (1977); Turner and Turner (1978); Hunt (1982): 50–82; Frend (1985): 567–571; Turner (1987); Ousterhout (1990); Walker (1990); Leyerle (1996): 345–357; Limor (1998); idem, (1999).}

The earliest pilgrims, like Bishop Melito of Sardis in Asia Minor, or Origenes, went to the holy places from motivations related to the study of the Bible, and their journey had a didactic and intellectual value. Origenes was a scholar and important Christian theologian in his time, with significant influence on future generations. The presence of a teacher of Origenes’s stature could not pass without influencing Christian spiritual life in Israel and the propagation of the religion. Eusebius’ compositions, too, emphasized the value of the holy places for knowing the Bible, and his \textit{Onomastikon} is indeed a clear attempt to bring together geographical and historical knowledge of the holy places for the purposes of teaching the Bible. Most pilgrims arrived out of a religious sentiment. A minority did so out of an adventurous inclination or for commercial reasons. Although Origenes (230 CE) and
Eusebius (340 CE) were not pilgrims in the common sense, and both were Church Fathers who resided in Caesarea, their writings are among the most cited sources on Palestine, as we will face later on.

Testimonies about Christian pilgrimage are found in varied sources—historical, literary, geographical, theological, and even archeological—from the Byzantine period. Nevertheless, the principal, concentrated information about the phenomenon exists in the _itineraria_, the literature of the pilgrims themselves. This genre was composed mainly in Latin by travelers from the West.  

The various descriptions in the pilgrims’ writings evidence the accelerated process of building churches and ritual places on a large and magnificent scale, most of them in places related to stories in the Bible and the New Testament. Pagan temples were torn down or turned to churches, and many Christians streamed to the Holy Land in order to visit the places mentioned in the Scriptures, places that were directly connected to Jesus and to his Disciples; sites that were sanctified at the initiative of the authorities or on behalf of church institutions; and sites that were sanctified by various Christians sects. The holy sites were concentrated in Jerusalem, in Nazareth, and in the area of the Sea of Galilee because most of the stories brought forth in the Gospels took place there. Hostels were built in the vicinity of the churches, and services for pilgrims installed in them. They were managed by monks who resided there and who became in the course of the fourth century CE responsible for the holy places and were entrusted with the spiritual welfare of the pilgrims—instruction and guidance—as well as with the physical arrangements of their stay.

Especially instructive among the main compositions of this literature in its early days were descriptions of the journey, such as that written by Antoninus of Placentia in northern Italy in 570 CE. Appended to the information is also first-hand, authentic testimony of the personal experience and behavior at the holy places. Moreover, one can even learn about a description of paths not only from Jerusalem to the various sites in the Holy Land, but also of his walking from Acre to the Galilee and afterwards southward to Jericho via the Jordan, and from there ascending to Jerusalem.

Although pilgrimage was a popular phenomenon at base and had very large dimensions, the sources necessarily highlight the pilgrim elite,