

Jerusalem journey

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [May 5, 1999](#) issue

Living Stones Pilgrimage: With the Christians in the Holy Land

By Allison Hilliard and Betty Jane Bailey. University of Notre Dame Press, 132 pp.

This book is filled with small but important travel suggestions for the traveler to Palestine/Israel. I have made the journey many times, but I discovered a useful tip for my next trip. The best hour to visit the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem's Old City is at the daily 4 a.m. opening of the church's front door. The church is less crowded, quieter and more conducive to reflection in the early morning hours. In addition, the official opening ceremony is worth witnessing, as Betty Jane Bailey and Allison Hilliard point out.

Since shortly after the end of the Crusades, two Muslim families have had control of the door of the church. One holds the key; the other has the right to open it. Each morning, one of the communities with "rights" in the church knocks at the wicket. A Greek sacristan calls the Muslim doorkeeper and hands him out a ladder, which is used to reach the door lock. Three bells announce the opening, one for each of the three "major" communities--Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox and Catholic--all of whom must agree that the church is open.

Too early to roust yourself up to witness this centuries-old ritual that symbolizes the coexistence of religious groups in Jerusalem? Here is a hint: Schedule the visit on your first or second day, while your body is still confused by jet lag. But, like the women who came to Christ's sepulcher on Easter morning, bring companions and a light. Jerusalem is dark at that hour.

Bailey and Hilliard are experienced travelers with a good sense of what will be important to Western visitors. Bailey, an American, has lived in Jerusalem as a representative of both the United Church of Christ and the Disciples of Christ; Hilliard reports from Palestine/Israel for the British Broadcasting Corporation. Their book was developed in collaboration with the Jerusalem Liaison Office of the Middle East Council of Churches, a valuable contact for groups traveling to the area. (The book includes telephone numbers for every organization or site mentioned in its pages.)

The book aims to introduce travelers to the "living stones," the Palestinian Christians who belong to the "thirteen different churches or denominations that are considered traditional, ranging from the ancient churches of the East to the Protestants of the Reformation." The book begins with a helpful summary of the groups, the largest of which are Oriental and Eastern Orthodox. It encourages visitors to seek out worshiping congregations for the varied theological exposures they offer and for the opportunity for conversations with local residents.

I was especially impressed with Bailey and Hilliard's suggestions regarding Gaza, not the usual stopping-off place for biblical sites. Gaza is not only the locale of Samson's haircut but also the place of numerous battles between the Philistines and the Israelites. Gaza Christians, a small minority in a predominantly Muslim population, feel cut off from visitors, since tour guides usually steer travelers away for reasons of "security." The book offers names and telephone numbers of active Christian organizations in Gaza for travelers who want to break away from rigid commercial tours and encounter fellow believers.

Bethlehem is another Palestinian town that large busloads of visitors too often rush through. In addition to the Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem has Christian institutions and worshiping congregations available for visits, including two schools, Bethlehem University and Bethlehem Bible College. The Lutheran Evangelical Christmas Church is an architectural gem, a short walk from Nativity Square. Its pastor, Mitri Raheb, will gladly inform visitors of the history of his congregation and speak about the church's International Center of Bethlehem and a future theological academy.

This is indispensable preparatory reading for a journey to Palestine/Israel. If you must travel on a commercially packaged tour (with its attractive freebies for clergy), insist on spending at least Sunday mornings with a Christian congregation. And stay after worship for the coffee hour, at which Palestinians will contradict much of what you have heard about them from your guides.