

*On my first visit to a pilgrimage site in the Holy Land, I wept. It was the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth, a post-modern, cavernous structure built atop what looked like nothing more than a clumsy, limestone-clad niche in a hillside. Yet tradition held that this was the spot where, according to the Gospel of Luke, the angel Gabriel hailed Mary as “blessed art thou among women” and the world forever changed.*

*So, standing there in that vast, open, honey-colored marble interior, riven by kaleidoscopic shards of stained-glass light, I wept, like so many other pilgrims before me, stretching back to antiquity.*

*Writing in the fourth-century CE, the Spanish nun, Egeria, recounted the experience of pilgrims gathered in Gethsemane, on the outskirts of Jerusalem, who were similarly moved upon reading the scriptural passage concerning Jesus’ arrest: “During the reading of this passage there is such . . . weeping from all the people that their moaning can be heard practically as far as the city,” she remarked.*

*The intersection of scripture and sacred real estate tends to have this effect on people, I have found, and with good reason. It is one thing to read the story of Jesus’ journey along the road to Emmaus, let alone the Via Dolorosa, and tread those same, ancient stones yourself; to visit the Sea of Galilee or stand along the muddy banks of the river Jordan, and literally and figuratively immerse yourself in the waters that came to symbolize one of the fundamental vehicles of Christian unity, baptism. From Egeria’s time onward, the Holy Land pilgrimage evolved with the history of the faith itself. Its layers of grief and greatness are evident in the scarred remains of Byzantine ruins, Crusader fortresses, and churches of numerous denominations throughout the region, accreted with centuries of candle smoke and incense, or towering in neo-Gothic glory. But in some deep-seated and inexplicably emotional way, it is the land itself and its deep connection to the faith that has the power to move us, as it did me. It is a power that speaks to what is known among Christian theologians as Jesus’ imminence, His earthly presence, as opposed to His transcendence, His heavenly power. So to stand where Jesus once stood, and pray where He once prayed, offers us the opportunity to engage with Him on both those levels, however briefly. To be moved to tears on pilgrimage, then, is itself a sort of baptism: a transformative moment in our faith and our relationship with Christ.*

Tom Verde

