

# LIVING STONES PILGRIMAGE

WITH THE CHRISTIANS OF THE HOLY LAND

Alison Hilliard and Betty Jane Bailey

A GUIDE



*Photographs by Garo Nalbandian*

## *Living Stones Pilgrimage*

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*With the Christians of the Holy Land*

ALISON HILLIARD AND BETTY JANE BAILEY

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## Foreword

*Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*

(1 Peter 2:4–5)

On an early spring morning almost 2,000 years ago, the Holy Spirit descended on a small group of people who were gathered in a room in Jerusalem. It was *in* this place that those first followers of Jesus became the earliest witnesses to the Gospel of Christ, giving rise to what would become the Church. It was *from* this place that those witnesses went into all the world to share the good news of God in Christ Jesus, planting the seeds of the Kingdom of God wherever they journeyed.

Today here in the Holy Land, descendants of those first Christian witnesses are still to be found. The Christians of the Holy Land, the 'living stones', continue to bear testimony to the power, truth and love of the Gospel, as they have done faithfully and continuously throughout the last two millennia in this place of Jesus' birth, ministry, passion and resurrection.

The local Christian community, your brothers and sisters, wish to invite you to their land, to share with you their narrative and their heritage, to help you discover the land in which our common faith is still rooted. This book is designed to help you to respond to that invitation as you seek to experience the living faith of Jesus Christ in this holy land.

We greet you in Christian fellowship and hospitality. *Ahlan wa Sahlan*: you are most welcome here!



*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you;  
and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judaea and  
Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*

(Acts 1:8)



Michel Sabbah

Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem

President, Middle East Council of Churches

September 1998

## *Appreciation*

This is a guidebook with a difference. It is more concerned with people than places. It is an invitation, not merely an explanation. It is written with a passion that stirs the heart of the reader. Its purpose is to transform Christian visitors into pilgrims by luring them off the tourist track into the company of Palestinian fellow-believers who trace their roots to the disciples of Jesus.

The introduction to the different churches in Jerusalem is written with the lucidity and accuracy that betray deep learning, but is infused with a warm sympathy that makes one want to experience liturgies fragrant with incense and framed by icons that glow and seem to move in the flames of flickering oil lamps.

The treatment of the holy places is infused with an astringent spirituality which makes it difficult for readers to remain on the surface of sites associated with Jesus both in Galilee and in Jerusalem. They are gently but firmly helped to give these places meaning in terms of their own lives by profound, pointed questions, key words designed to focus reflection, and suggestions for prayer. It would be hard to imagine a more effective antidote to the mawkish sentimentality that claims to evoke, but only succeeds in masking, the reality of Jesus' struggle.

This creative and timely book empowers pilgrims to reclaim in fellowship with Palestinian Christians the land in which the Word became flesh. It enables them to make it their spiritual home.

Jerome Murphy-O'Connor OP  
Ecole Biblique, Jerusalem

## *Welcome*

Ever since I assumed the directorship of the Jerusalem Liaison Office in late 1996, I have wanted to publish, under the name of the Middle East Council of Churches, an alternative guidebook that will not only complement our own ministry of ecumenical travel services, but also focus on the local Christians of the Holy Land. As a result, Alison and Betty co-authored this guidebook as an alternative resource for Christian pilgrims to the Holy Land. Ideally, it will be used alongside the numerous commercial guidebooks available on the market which contain an A to Z of holy sites, as well as basic information on travel and accommodation.

Christian pilgrimage is not new to the Holy Land! It has been going on since well before AD 333, the date of the first diary kept by a Christian pilgrim from Bordeaux. For centuries, pilgrims stayed in monasteries, convents or the homes of fellow-believers, sharing prayer and news, theological ideas and liturgical practices. Twentieth-century mass tourism, however, with its comfortable hotels, air-conditioned coaches and tightly packed schedules, transformed pilgrims into tourists, pilgrimages into holidays, and effectively hid the local Christian community from the visitor. Very few tour guides in Israel today are Palestinian – either Christian or Muslim. It is all too common to hear Christian Palestinians expressing both frustration and disappointment that Christians coming from abroad are either ignorant about the existence of indigenous Christians in the land where Christianity was born, or too busy visiting biblical sites to spend a few hours with those ‘living stones’ who trace their roots to Jesus’ disciples and to the Church of the First Pentecost. After all, they say, Christianity is not frozen in a biblical time warp!

This book, then, is a guide to living Christianity in the Holy

Land, aiming to facilitate your contact with local Christians and to introduce you to some church traditions and practices you may not be familiar with. Unfamiliarity can lead to alienation, and I suggest that you read this guidebook to make yourself feel more at home with those who share your own faith within a different cultural setting.

Use it to meet local Christians and hear their stories of life in a troubled land. Although their numbers have dwindled in percentage terms over the last 50 years, there are today around 114,000 Christians in Israel proper and another 51,000 in the Occupied Palestinian territories. Altogether, Christians constitute just over 2.4 per cent of the overall population in the Holy Land. Listen to them talking about some of the hardships of daily life here and join with them as they worship together. They need your prayers and support, but they also need the reassurance that they have not become the forgotten faithful. Let them open their homes and churches to you and share with you some of the richness of their historical and contemporary witness to the Christian faith.

Included in this guidebook is a section on the major church denominations in Jerusalem, and then some alternative ways to go beyond the typical – commercial – purview of tourism. There are three walks within Jerusalem designed to make the old, traditional Christian pilgrimage routes more contemporary. Bethlehem is presented both as a biblical city and as a modern-day town preparing for the 2,000th anniversary of the birth of Jesus Christ. Sites around the Sea of Galilee are the inspiration for meditating on life today. Gaza is presented as an opportunity to discover how the churches and human rights organizations have responded to the contemporary Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

The section on towns and villages highlights areas rarely on a travel itinerary but with a significant Christian presence or important Christian institutions. Christian celebrations reflect a panoply of traditions known to those who live in the Holy Land but not always discovered by first-time travellers. Responsible shopping and bookstore listings allow you to return home with meaningful souvenirs.

In short, consider this guidebook as an invitation to an alternative encounter with the Holy Land and as an opportunity to enrich your own faith by sharing in the presence, life and witness of local Christians.

And as I invite you to the Holy Land, I would like to express my gratitude to all those who helped Alison and Betty with this guidebook – from the Church leadership to the Palestinian grassroots. A special word of thanks goes out to Christian Aid in London, one of our staunchest ecumenical partners, for helping us fund this guidebook and marketing it in the United Kingdom.

*Salaam in Shalom.*

Dr Harry Hagopian  
Executive Director  
Jerusalem Liaison Office



## *Introduction to the Jerusalem churches*

Jerusalem is home to thirteen different churches or denominations that are considered traditional, ranging from the ancient churches of the East to the Protestants of the Reformation.

Many of its churches' traditions are unfamiliar to Western visitors who come to see the holy sites and end up running where Jesus walked, leaving no time to be spiritually enriched or challenged by the 'living stones' who live and worship in Jerusalem today. Often too, many pilgrims participate only in the acts of worship organized for their own tour group by a leader 'from home', and thus leave the city unaware of the diversity and richness of local Christian worship going on daily in churches throughout the Holy Land.

This guide to Jerusalem's churches is an introduction to the main church denominations in the city, sharing a little of their history, their traditions and the buildings in which they worship. It is also designed to be an alternative and a more authentic way of exploring Jerusalem and its holy sites.

The larger number of Palestinian Christians are Orthodox, dividing into either Oriental Orthodox or Eastern Orthodox. The separation of the two Orthodox families arose out of a disagreement in the fifth century over how to define the human and divine natures of Christ. The Eastern Orthodox accepted the definition proposed at the Fourth Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon in 451 that Christ was two eternally inseparable natures, both human and divine. The Oriental Orthodox rejected the council's definition in favour of other definitions of the nature of Christ and became known as non-Chalcedonian Orthodox, or

Monophysites (one nature-ites). The Oriental Orthodox are not in communion with either Constantinople (Greek Orthodoxy) or Rome. Today, however, the theological differences between the Oriental and Eastern Orthodox have largely been overcome and the two families are divided more for historic than doctrinal reasons.

The Orthodox tradition may be unfamiliar to you. If it is, introduce yourself to a new way of worshipping, using icons, incense, ceremonial and meditative prayer. Feast your senses on the bright colours and rich decoration of the places of prayer which for centuries have been hallowed by worship into sacred spaces where heaven and earth meet.

Begin with the Greek Catholic (Melkite) Church just inside Jaffa Gate (page 35). Although it is Catholic, in communion with Rome, it is a good entry point into the Orthodox tradition, faithfully following most of the Eastern Orthodox practices. It is, for example, one of the best places to learn how to read the iconography so loved by Orthodox Christians.

Icons are meant to be like open books that remind us of God and that give visual form to doctrines of the church. They are not worshipped but they point to God and help make God's acts known to the world. They are also considered 'thin places', where the persons and events pictured are present to the believer in the here and now. The icon therefore becomes a two-way window into the world of the Spirit – into the Kingdom of God, reminding the worshipper of the great company of Christians in all times and places who are still present as they worship God.

Go along to a local service – there is usually at least one every day in every church. (Information on times is available from the Christian Information Centre near Jaffa Gate: see page 125. Note that the times can change for summer and winter. The CIC has an accurate list of service times.) Stop and talk to those who are the descendants of the Church of the First Pentecost and whose ancestors have lived and worshipped here for centuries.

If you go to worship remember to dress modestly, covering your arms and wearing loose trousers or a modest skirt. Expect to stand. The absence of pews or seats in a large number of

Orthodox churches demonstrates a flexible worship, an informality whereby people can come and go freely, accommodating personal piety as well as community worship. People here are at home in their church.

The liturgy itself is seen as the meeting place between doctrine and worship. It is the vehicle which forms the bridge between heaven and earth, bringing the transcendent God and humanity into contact with each other. It is an unhurried and timeless experience of heaven and earth in the company of God, all the angels and all the saints.

Services can last for up to four hours – this is time outside earthly constraints! It is not rude, however, to leave. Light a candle and say a prayer before you go.

The liturgy is mostly drawn from the words of Scripture and is sung or chanted. Singing is the way Orthodox Christians pray in church. It is the way the church worships. The language and the melodies may be strange to you. Lose the quest to know and understand everything. Instead, allow the music to be your passport into this ageless experience, stilling you to reflection and meditation.

If you would like to organize more formal meetings with local churches and their members, there are details on pages 126–7 of organizations which can help. Also included is a telephone and fax contact point for each church if you want more information on times of services, opening hours or to set up your own encounter.

The memories and insights you gain from these experiences are to be found in no guidebook. It is the faith of local Christians, after all, which breathes life into dead stones.



## ORIENTAL ORTHODOX

### *Armenian Orthodox Church*

After Armenia became the first nation to adopt Christianity as a state religion in AD 301, Armenian Christian pilgrims began to travel to the Holy Land. Many settled in the south-east side of the ancient city, which is now the Armenian quarter, forming about one-sixth of the Old City. Armenians claim to have the longest uninterrupted presence in Jerusalem and the Armenian Church is one of the three guardians of the Holy Places, along with the Greek Orthodox and the Franciscan Holy Custody (Catholics).

The early Armenian pilgrims built the first Armenian church in Jerusalem in the fourth century, St James's Cathedral. Today's present cathedral is built on the site of the original church. It is erected over the place where the head of St James, the apostle of Jesus, is said to be buried. He was martyred in AD 44 and is today the patron saint of Armenians. The Cathedral is named after that St James, and also after St James, the brother of the Lord, who was appointed as the first Christian Bishop of Jerusalem after Christ's ascension to heaven. His relics are buried under the main altar of the church.

Today's cathedral, at the entrance to the Armenian convent area, is a marriage of Crusader and Armenian architecture – the dome, for example, is typical of a tenth-century church in Armenia. It faces east, as do all Armenian churches, and is built in such a way that the sun does not set in the church. Its small windows allow it to receive natural light from morning to late afternoon and spectacular shafts of sunlight regularly flood the church. All the prayers in the church are therefore in daylight with the sun seen to symbolize the light of life and the nature of God. Vespers are from 3 p.m. to 3.30 p.m., the only weekday time the