

## **Oral Tradition, Ancient History and Religious Tourism Knowledge**

### **Abstract**

Religious tourism is one of the most longstanding forms of leisure related travel in the world with a history dating back to antiquity. However, there has been a hesitation amongst many tourism scholars to critically assess the role of ancient religious texts to understand the attitudes and behaviors of religious tourists and tourism destinations. With reference to literature on oral traditions, the aim of this exploratory paper is to critically consider the insights that can be derived from the Christian Bible for the management and scholarly understanding of contemporary religious tourism. This paper suggests that Christianity's oral traditions and their ensuing written representation in the Bible provide an important means of understanding religion 'as lived' in the ancient world. Religious tourists are often driven by a pilgrim's mentality to tread in the footsteps of the first apostles and other religious leaders. From a historical perspective, the oral formulation of the New Testament and its subsequent influence on the formation of the Bible as a religious text offers religious tourists an insight into such people and the places/ experiences that were important in the faith of the early church.

### **Key Words**

Oral tradition; religious tourism; the New Testament

### **Introduction**

Religious tourism can be broadly described as "a form of tourism to sacred sites and places of religious importance" (Shinde, 2022a, p. 664). With historical antecedents in the practices of religious pilgrimages, religious tourism is often championed as a mechanism for encouraging greater intragenerational and inter-cultural understanding (United Nations World Tourism Organisation, 2016). For several decades tourism academics have studied religious tourism on account of the opportunities that it affords to explore "a travel cohort that is both broad and/or segmented, consisting of those seeking the fulfilment of contemporary, high dimensional desires, such as spirituality, contemplation, tranquillity, and guidance" (Kim, Kim, & King, 2020, p. 185).

There currently is a significant body of literature on religious tourism with review papers (e.g., Collins-Kreiner, 2020b; Kim et al., 2020; Olsen & Timothy, 2022; Rashid, 2018; Ruttanavisanon & Agmapisarn, 2022; Sharpley, 2009) demonstrating significant coverage of issues including the motivations and behaviours of religious tourists (e.g., Huang & Pearce, 2019; Lochrie et al., 2019; Patwardhan, Ribeiro, Woosnam, Payini, & Mallya, 2020; Wang, Chen, & Huang, 2016); the management of religious tourism sites (e.g., Chianeh, Del Chiappa, & Ghasemi, 2018; Kala, 2021; Shinde, 2022b); the economic potential of religious tourism as a sector of the wider tourism industry (e.g., Ali, Maharani, & Untari, 2019; Alodadi & Benhin, 2015; Vukonic, 2002); and the role of a tourism scholar's personal religious beliefs in the study of tourism (Schweinsberg, 2023a, 2023b). To date, however, there has been an absence of detailed academic attention paid to the role of historical sources, such as the Bible, the Quran, the Torah, and the Bhagavad Gita, in the formation of religious tourism knowledge and management. Such works are the foundational texts of the Christian, Muslim, Hebrew, and Hindu faiths, and yet they are often seen as simply part of the backdrop of academic study of religious tourism, as opposed to texts that can be used to understand the contemporary practice of religious tourism in specific destinations.

With specific reference to the Bible, the aim this exploratory paper is to investigate some of the opportunities and challenges in using the Bible as a source in our contemporary exploration of religious tourism practice. Drawing on recent insights from oral history as it has been applied to contemporary academic research practice (e.g. Trapp-Fallon, 2007; Trapp-Fallon & Lo Iacono, 2022) this paper will consider how ancient texts can be viewed through two independent, but yet also related lenses, which are their literary and linguistic traditions, as well as their social setting (Murray, 2001). By exploring the early oral framing of the Christian faith, we will also contribute towards addressing the absence of tourism scholarly attention in the value and use of ancient sources (exceptions being MacKenzie, Pittaki, & Wong, 2020; Towner, 1988). When Towner (1988) discusses ancient historical sources in the study of tourism, he mentions the important role of artefacts, letters on papyrus, as well as oral traditions, noting that the latter “within living memory ... would seem to offer a particularly valuable insight into the importance of tourism for different social groups” (p. 51). It is this assertion that we will critically consider in this paper in relation to religious tourism.

### **Ancient history, Oral Tradition and Tourism/ Biblical Research**

I inquired about *the words* of the ancients, what Andrew or Peter or Philip or Thomas or James or John or Matthew or any other of the Lord's disciples *said*, and what Ariston and the elder John, the Lord's disciples, were *saying*. For I did not suppose that things from books (*ek tôn bibliôn*) would benefit me so much as things *from a living and abiding voice* (*zôsês phonês kai menousês*)

(Papias, bishop of Hierapolis (Eusebius 3.39.3-4) in Horsley, 2010, pp. 102 - italics in original)

Many localities in the Middle East and Mediterranean were, for travelers in ancient times, places to experience different nationalities and to observe local customs and behaviors (Foubert, 2018). Today, such localities also form an important part of the study and practice of religious tourism (Kim et al., 2020). However, remaining largely unaddressed in the tourism literature are the lessons that can be gleaned from ancient societies and sources for the management of tourism today. This lacuna arguably reflects the fact that when contemporary scholars attempt to understand the ancient world, they are often constrained by the passage of time which often limits the availability of sources of knowledge (Morley, 1999). For example, the oral communications and teachings of the early Christian church are not accessible to scholars today – the earliest written copies of sections of the New Testament that survive date from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, the so-called P46 parchment extracts of Paul's letters and epistles (for further information on the history of the P46, including its Greek nomenclature see Andrews, 2023; de Vries, 2013).

We are nowadays accustomed to thinking of the Bible as a written text that does not change, as opposed to recognizing that it is in-fact a collection of sixty-six individual books (including historical retrospectives, poems, prophetic visions, narratives, and genealogies) that were written across more than a century in Aramaic, Greek and Hebrew dialects. From a religious tourism perspective the Bible represents a backdrop for our understanding of contemporary travel choices and experiences (Kartal, Tepeci, & Atlı, 2015; Ron & Timothy, 2013) and for appreciating the historical antecedents of clashes between pilgrims from Islamic, Judaic and Christian belief systems (Mosafa, 2018). However, can it be relied on as a historical source? Similarly, for tourism academics, given the importance placed on ensuring the rigor in our scholarly activities – notions of “plausibility, transparency, credibility, dependability, triangulation and conformability” (Tribe, 2018, p. 16); can we place any credence in

documents like the Bible as a scholarly source to inform our understanding of religious tourism practice?

When we start to explore the history of the Bible's formulation we must recognise that it was originally communicated through oral testimony (Barton, 2019). The idea that the new testament was originally communicated in oral form is understandable when one remembers that only ten percent of the people in the Roman World was literate during the time of Jesus Christ (5 BC – 30 AD) and during the rise of the early church (Harris, 1989). Jews living in first century Palestine, including Jesus himself (see Keith, 2011), would often come to know the Bible, not from personal reading but from attending mass to hear the Torah (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, namely, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy) recited to them with the authority of these and other ancient traditions lying with the reputation of the speaker (D. Carr, 2011; Walton & Sandy, 2013).

The idea that ancient writers/historians based much of their works on oral traditions has for millennia led to questions regarding their truthfulness (Currie, 2022). For instance, ancient writers such as Herodotus, who was writing his *Histories* in about 430BC, is today recognised as having an important role in founding what we now call cultural and heritage tourism (Edgell, 2006). And yet, some eighty percent of his information on the Greek and Persian world came from oral sources – if there were any written sources they were never acknowledged (Walton & Sandy, 2013). Currie (2022) observes that until the 1980s, the prevailing view of many historians was that Herodotus was often questionable in terms of the accuracy in his historical reporting. More recently, however, attitudes have begun to soften, with scholars recognizing that Herodotus was writing at a time when the study of history was only in the earliest stages of its intellectual development (Cartledge, 2009). It was an era where myth and memory often merged seamlessly with more quantifiable and objective descriptions of landscapes and the geography of the Hellenic world.

Hezser (2010, p. 75) has argued that, in the ancient world “only face-to-face communications would guarantee the reliable transmission of words and opinions of one person to another, whereas mediated messages would always be suspected of misinterpretation or even forgery”. Such an interpretation of what constitutes knowledge rigor is, of course, antithetical for many contemporary tourism scholars for whom scientific peer review processes and the written word represent the stated word on what is ‘truth’ (Tribe, 2018). Nevertheless, are we right to arbitrarily dismiss ancient oral testimony as being as something less than truthful because of what we view as being inconsistencies in the final written accounts that have come down from this testimony? To answer this, we must acknowledge that oral traditions and histories can be susceptible to misrepresentation (Medvedkova, 2014), just as histories are nothing more than interpretations of facts and events (E. Carr, 2008/ 1961). But at the same time, however, we must recognise that oral testimony is a culturally framed interaction between speaker and audience (Adams & Cronin, 2019), one where the power of a person's testimony is embedded in an understanding of the circumstances in which one is writing.

The formation and the respect afforded to oral tradition has historically been grounded in contemporary societies' perspective of the literary and linguistic forms and the social setting in which information is preserved (Murray, 2001). Throughout the New Testament of the Bible, contemporary debate persists as to the accuracy contained in the various accounts (see Dickson, 2018; Ehrman, 2005) – the Gospels (Mathew, Mark, Luke, and John), the acts of the apostles (Acts), the epistles (Romans, 1&2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, 1&2 Timothy, Philemon, Hebrews, James, 1&2 Peter, 1-3 John & Jude) and the apocalypse (the Book of Revelation). Some commentators, such as the evolutionary biologist and prominent ‘new atheist’ Richard Dawkins, have

gone as far at one point to argue that what is presented in the biblical narratives is purely fiction (Dawkins, 2006). Other commentators adopt a more nuanced position, recognizing that there are obvious theological messages that one may accept or deny on the basis of one's belief in the Christian faith. At the same time, however, even if a reader were to view all of the overtly Christian teachings in the New Testament as apocryphal, the writings in the Bible may still offer tourism scholars an insight into the formation of the early Christian church and what it was like to live in the ancient Roman world. The reason for this is that ancient peoples had a greater capacity to communicate oral testimony. In the Muslim tradition, for instance, *shaykhs* were expected to memorize the Quran, which contains over seventy-seven thousand words (Eickelman, 1978). Bailey (1995) has noted that even outside of the practiced skill of religious elders, there was the capacity within ancient communities to tell stories, parables, poetry, and riddles as part of the collective identity of the group. If someone attempts to tell a story incorrectly, they will be corrected according to the nature and intent of the material – the story has become part of a group's collective consciousness.

It was in the context of this oral tradition that the early Christian church survived in the decades after Jesus's crucifixion. The earliest published books of the New Testament are said to have been written between AD 48 to AD 66 in the form of the Epistles or Letters of Paul (Elliott & Reasoner, 2010). Other books of the New Testament, such as the Gospels, were then written later in the years between AD 60 to around the year AD 100 (Habermas, 2009). However, while these writings took advantage of new technologies such as the codex (book) and were beneficial in distributing the Christian message throughout the Roman world and were later revered as holy objects that were held by monasteries and cathedrals (Horsley, 2010), they were not seen as more trustworthy than oral traditions but, rather, as complimentary sources of information (Walton & Sandy, 2013). Literary traditions subsequently were used alongside oral traditions for more than a millennium (Nelson, Kempf, & Wood, 2017). Then, during the sixteenth century, the Reformation drew into stark focus evolving oral and literary traditions and their potential to be corrupted. Later, there were the oral traditions of Catholic theologians and the revolutionary perspectives of the Lutheran '*sola scriptura*' who argued that only the written word of God could be seen as the fountainhead of religious knowledge, and that all other doctrines had "authority only in so far as they were consonant with the bible" (Hudson, 1996, p. 162).

### **Ancient Oral Traditions, Religious Tourism and Academic Rigour: Why Might it Matter?**

Academic rigor refers to the "intellectual precision, robustness and appropriateness of the concepts, theories and methodologies deployed within a research process" (HEFCE, 2012, pp. 66-67 in Tribe, 2018, p. 16). Today, academics are schooled to be critical of sources where the authority of the author is seen as questionable or where the 'truthfulness' of the information they contain cannot be independently confirmed. How, then, should we approach sources from the ancient world that have their basis in oral testimony and traditions that have for millennia been open to debate regarding their veracity? The first thing we must remember is that "history is a set of evolving rules and tools that allows us to interpret the past with clarity, rigor, and an appreciation for interpretative debate. It requires evidence, sophisticated use of information, and a deliberative stance to explain change and continuity over time" (American Historical Association, 2015 in Battilani et al., 2016, p. 73). Perhaps more than any other area of tourism scholarship, religious tourism is an area of research where the antecedents of contemporary traveller motivations and behaviours can be traced back to the earliest periods of societal understanding (see for example the theorisation of religious travel in Islam in Luz, 2020). For this reason, we cannot ignore the social context in which such religious beliefs first developed. But equally, we are also obligated to consider the sources in front of us, for their

“plausibility, credibility, transparency, dependability, triangulation, and confirmability” (Tribe, 2018, p. 16).

Redfield (1985) argued with respect to the writings of Herodotus that whilst he might be skeptical in believing in the value in “unsystematic travelers’ reports ... the ethnographic perspective does provide an entry to Herodotus, for if every culture is a system, every artifact within the culture is characteristic of it – Herodotus’ *Histories* included” (p. 98). Just as Herodotus’ primary focus in his writing was not a description of travel in the ancient world but rather to “preserve the past by putting on record the astonishing achievements both of our own and of the Asiatic people and, more particularly, to show how the two races [Greeks and Persians] came into conflict” (Herodotus, 1968, p. 1) – so too must we recognise that the intention of the Christian New Testament was not to act as a precursor for contemporary religious tourism, but rather to preserve the word of God’s covenant with humanity and to provide a testimony of witnesses to the birth, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (see Ferrer, 2019 for a discussion of the Old Testament in relation to religious tourism). It is not the role of the present paper to comment on the fantastical or miraculous in the Bible (see Keener, 2011; Kindt, 2016). After all, as C. S. Lewis once observed, “if immediate experience cannot prove or disprove the miraculous, still less can history do so” (1968, p. 7). However, when we stop thinking about the Bible solely as a document of divine providence and instead view it also as a written artefact of a cultural group penned during a period of history, we can also glean insights regarding the earliest days of the church – the experiences of the apostles during periods of persecution, the constant challenges in communicating the Christian faith to diverse religious communities throughout the Mediterranean world, and so on. In this way, ancient works based on oral traditions can be seen as valuable for understanding religious tourism today, much as classical poetry can be seen as valuable for influencing the travelers’ gaze in China, creating a cultural value for a locality whilst offering a tangible recording of past events (Yu & Xu, 2016).

As tourism scholars, we therefore do not need to be Christian ourselves to recognise that Christian authors do have a religious conviction and that the oral and written words they express are likely to be relevant for understanding the motivations and experiences of Christian pilgrims and other religious tourists today. Just as other non-Christian writers such as Tacitus, Josephus and Suetonius refer to the teachings of Jesus and the early church (Van Voorst, 2000) and their writings are often regarded by contemporary audiences as some of the finest writings on the history of the ancient world, so too should the writings of the Bible be also considered in relation to their words, meanings and purposes in the contemporary practice of religious tourism. In the final section we will begin to consider some of the insights that a biblical perspective may provide for the study of religious tourism.

### *The Bible and Contemporary Religious Tourism Insights*

Modern religious tourism is a contested concept involving the interplay between a range of different peoples and groups with different motivations, experiences, and belief structures (Sharpley, 2022). As an identifiable tourism form, religious tourism offers personal opportunities for pilgrimage and the associated opportunity for travelers to visit “sites or associated attractions such as art, culture, customs and architecture” (Heydan Chianeh et al., 2018 in Das, Kondasani, & Deb, 2023). Some of the rules and traditions that represent different Christian denominations have developed over time such as the historical development of Marian feasts throughout the Middle Ages (see Znorovszky & Jaritz, 2022). Other characteristics of the Christian faith can, however, be traced back to its earliest days, specifically the apostles’ recognition in the divinity of Jesus stemming from his birth, death, and resurrection, and key aspects of his teachings. The New Testament gospels and the Bible more broadly are documents

that are temporally and geographically situated in regions around modern-day Israel, Syria, and Jordan and therefore the Bible is the foundational document available to travelers wishing to immerse themselves in the world of the early church. In particular, they give tourists insight into ancient Jewish and later Christian notions of local agricultural life and food and the important role of community in the formation of one of the most central of Christian traditions – the Eucharist – where Christians celebrate and remember the words said by Jesus just prior to his death.

Today there is an expanding industry developing around the experience of ‘authentic’ biblical meals (Ron & Timothy, 2013; Timothy, 2018) and some of the most vivid descriptions of what these should involve draw directly from the scriptures that have in-turn been passed down through oral tradition. Food was seen as an essential part of the gospel narratives of Jesus’s life, representing both opportunities for communion with his disciples and other people he met, but also the stage for some of the miracles such as the feeding of the five thousand (from *Matthew 14: 13-21*). Throughout the two millennia since the time of Jesus, food and its consumption has served as an important foundation of Christian pilgrimage (Ron & Timothy, 2018). Today, travellers are offered the opportunity to engage in different experiences from different tourism providers, e.g., “Immerse yourself in the first-century experience and celebrate your tour at Nazareth Village with a feast of biblical proportions” (Nazareth Village, 2023). Prior to travelling companies provide tourists with information on what the meals in ancient times might contain (see Nazareth Village, 2023). However, when one incorporates a scriptural perspective, we are also able to discern the social circumstances governing Jesus and the disciples’ interactions with the Pharisees and other people during those meals. For example,:

<sup>36</sup> When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, he went to the Pharisee’s house and reclined at the table. <sup>37</sup> A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee’s house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. <sup>38</sup> As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.

(Luke 7: 36-38 in New International Version, 2016, p. 1760)

Such perspectives are essential for religious tourists striving to establish an authentic connection to the Jesus and the Disciples; “to walk literally where Jesus walked, or to eat the food he ate, are powerful motives for Christians to travel to Israel” (Ron & Timothy, 2013, p. 236). More broadly, Aulet et al. (2022) have argued that food in the ancient world were subject to a variety of codes and traditions which related to the preparation and consumption of meals. In the case of the aforementioned passage from the book of Luke, we see evidence of the practice for men in the Roman world of lying down to eat meals (Roller, 2006). Readers can also choose to interpret Jesus’s subsequent decision to forgive the woman her sins through the lens of a tacit rebuttal of existing social mores where men and women and, in particular men and women of different classes, were segregated at mealtimes (Schmittzoh, ND). It has often been said that it was Jesus’s nonconformity to the social, political, and religious conventions of the time contributed to the decision of the authorities to sentence him to death. For religious tourists a fuller appreciation of the context in which meals were consumed is essential to understand that it is not so-much a meal they are re-creating but events that articulated statements as to their faith.

The scriptures also provide vivid descriptions of the events and locations encompassing Jesus’s baptism in the Jordan river, as well as recounting the final days of Jesus’s life – his passion including his triumphal entry on a donkey into Jerusalem, the Last Supper, his arrest, and trial before the Jewish authorities (the Sanhedrin) and Pilate, his crucifixion, death, and burial. The site of Jesus’s baptism by John the Baptist is said to have been very near to the currently observed site “near the Dead Sea and

Jericho – Qaser el-Yahud (on the Israeli side) and Bethany beyond the Jordan (on the Jordanian side)” (Ron & Timothy, 2018, p. 52). Evidence of the commercialization of the site has been traced back to at least the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, and such development is projected to continue to rise with plans for the development of a \$300 million 'tourist city' adjacent to what is a designated UNESCO World Heritage site” (Al-Khalidi, 2022). Although proposed infrastructure such as walking trails, botanic gardens, boutique hotels and souvenir shops are important for religious tourism’s growth and development (see Ron & Timothy, 2018), the actual descriptions of Jesus’s experience in the Bible (see Matthew 3:13-17) are also important motivators for those visiting the site who want to go beyond cultural pilgrimage experiences and secular interaction with the region (Al Zoubi & Yahaya, 2020) and also embrace the historical significance of the event in the development of the Christian faith.

The final days of Jesus’s life, including his Passion, similarly form an important component of events such as the Catholic Church World Youth Day. First instigated by Pope John Paul II in 1984, World Youth Days are not normally located in localities that themselves have any particular religious significance – Buenos Aires, Denver, Paris, Madrid, Krakow etc. (see Ron & Timothy, 2018, p. 152). Rather, they represent opportunities for prayer, reflection, and devotion through a variety of events including masses, concerts and other social events designed to encourage faith building and communion. In the case of the World Youth Day in Sydney in 2005, events included a stations of the cross that was re-enacted in and around the industrial waterfront of Sydney Harbour. While each of the Gospels provide slightly different interpretations of the passion story, the experience for the tourists is derived from the overall experience – the ability to follow the Biblical narration (Gil Fuentetaja & Abad-Galzacorta, 2019) to places including the Mount of Olives and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher as part of a desire for prayer, reconciliation, and confession (Albayrak et al., 2018) even if the traveler is not actually physically present in that location. When we view the descriptions of key moments from such events, such as the last supper on the evening before Jesus’s death, we need to think of their validity not only in terms of the textual similarities and differences but also in terms of their role as sources of future ritualistic practice which has preserved key aspects of their stories for future generations of believers (see Vansina & Wright, 1961 for a discussion of the inherent validity in such sources).

From these examples we can discern that the Bible can play a role in the management of religious tourism. But what of its relevance to tourism scholars? All scholars who are researching the ancient world will eventually have to confront the reality that there is a paucity of sources reflecting the ravages of time. It is not possible for any contemporary scholar to “describe Jesus’s life [including his exact movements] with untroubled assurance and complete accuracy because of his historical inaccessibility” (Kennedy, 2011, p. 23). Jesus’s ministry was communicated orally in the form visits to various parts of Judea and the teaching of core messages in the form of ‘simple’ parables that were designed to be remembered and repeated over time. The central validity of the story, including the existence of a man called Jesus who lived and died in the first century AD, are supported by other Jewish writers from the period such as the afore mentioned Tacitus. But what of academics who wish to investigate something beyond this and explore the validity of the Bible including the fantastical elements and its relevance for the study of religious tourism? We would suggest that whether one believes in the Christian faith or not, the texts of the Bible should be “preserved as textual documents that call for further reading as well as [for] cultivation as specimens of cultural history and heritage” (Anttonen, 2012, p. 325). The oral foundations of the Bible play an important role in the Bible’s relevance as a source of scholarly investigation of the ancient world, providing the reader with the views and experiences of ordinary people (Trapp-Fallon, 2007). One of the unique aspects of the formulation of the New Testament relative to other ancient religious documents, such as the Quran, is the nature of its authorship. Muslim traditions hold that the text of the Quran was revealed verbatim to the Prophet Muhammad by the archangel Gabriel and that the words of the Quran have remained

constant to the present day (Al-Azami, 2008). In the case of the New Testament of the Bible, however, the gospels were God written by people – not as chronological histories but rather as illustrations of what Jesus meant for each writer, and what it was about Jesus that marked him as the author's personal lord and savior (Franke, 2012).

## Conclusions

Collins-Kreiner (2020a) recently argued that it has become necessary to develop a holistic perspective on religious tourism, one that will transcend disciplinary boundaries and search for meaning in an increasingly pluralistic and fractured world. This paper has argued that an important part of efforts to understand the nature of Christian religious tourism will be a recognition that the Bible cannot be seen as simply part of a passive backdrop to the faith. Rather, it is a living document, that can help us to understand the motivations, beliefs, and practices of modern religious tourists. We do not seek to deny the Bible's divine origins in the eyes of Christians and the challenges that this presents for tourism scholars who may seek to dispute the reliability of the Bible on the grounds of scientific credibility (Schweinsberg, 2023b). At the same time, however, we have presented a discussion of the Bible's historical formulation not with an agenda to proselytize a faith-based position but rather to argue that whatever one's religious convictions, the Bible and other ancient religious texts are sources that religious tourism scholars should be prepared to engage with more fully if they wish to understand the ancient world.

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