

Seeing Through the Eyes of the Voyager (A Review of *Twelve Pilgrims*)

Priscilla Queen Kparevzua
Department of English
University of Jos, Jos, Nigeria

The metaphor of seeing is a powerful one, and *Twelve Pilgrims* is a product of seeing. On the cover, we see the clear road marks of the meandering road through the arid mountains and valleys of Palestine. This is a powerful image and the emotion it invokes in each of us depends on our history of the Holy Land, and our feelings about it. For some, it invokes a sense of awe, for others melancholy, and still for others, nostalgia. But none of us is left unaffected by it. It is the same picture, the one we see on the cover; but we each react to it differently. Such is the power of seeing. It is just as the American writer Rick Riordan once observed:

"Humans see what they want to see."

But there is much more complexity in seeing.

"We don't see things as they are; we see them as we are"

So declared the Spanish-Cuban author Anais Nin.

Twelve Pilgrims enables us to see the Holy Land in its complex simplicity. It enables us to connect in vivid and unpretentious ways with what we know of the Biblical portrayal of Palestine, and in this sense, to also connect afresh with our beliefs and our faith. I find *Twelve Pilgrims* fascinating for the many ways in which it is unassuming and unpretentious. First, the book is a testimony to faith, but does not lay any claims to being an authority on matters of faith. Second, it is a refreshing historical review of Biblical history, and a contemporary account of present day Palestine. Again, it does not lay any claims to any expertise on historical documentation. Third, it is a political statement about the Bassa people of Nasarawa state, with a very subtle, yet unmistakable thread drawn to connect the wilderness trek of the ancient Jews on their way to the promised land, to the

Seeing Through the Eyes of the Voyager
(A Review of *Twelve Pilgrims*)

yearnings for similar fulfilment by the Bassa people to achieve a land of promise, not just through physical settlement, but more important, a yearning for access, or greater access to the “milk and honey” in that land. All of this is presented through the eyes of a voyager, a pilgrim. *Twelve Pilgrims* is a simple travelogue. As the Nobel Prize-winning Austrian physicist Erwin Schrodinger once said:

“The task is...not so much to see what no one has yet seen; but to think what nobody has yet thought, about that which everybody sees.”

The sights described in the book are not unknown. What fascinates the reader of this book is the perspective of the author; the human connection, the impact of the experience on him and how it influenced his soul. We find ourselves making his experience our own. Indeed, people have travelled to the Holy Land, and many have written their accounts of it but when you read *Twelve Pilgrims*, you can easily connect with it, because you have the sense that it contains the observations of someone like you. It is like the author is saying, ‘I went to Tiberias, to Eliat, to the Sinai, to Jerusalem; and this is what I saw. This is what I experienced.’ In a sense, we could summarise, and even conclude our review at this point, without making any more fuss about it. We could just say concerning the book: ‘I went, I saw, I wrote.’ but that would be a bit too simplistic.

A Brief Summary of *Twelve Pilgrims*

What really is the story of *Twelve Pilgrims*? In a nutshell, it is this: The author, Samson S. Daudu, was nominated by the Nasarawa State government in 2002 to travel on a Christian pilgrimage to Israel. Along with other pilgrims, they left on January 13, 2003. They flew via Turkey to Tel Aviv. The reader is then taken on a fascinating ten-day trip in and around Jerusalem to several historical and Biblical landmarks: from Mountains, to Basilicas to Gardens to seashores to tombs and an amazing five-day sojourn in the city of Jerusalem itself.

As you read, you will be transported to Jaffa, St. Peter’s Church, and the coastal city of Caesarea on the Mediterranean, to King Herod’s

Water Channel at Kibbutz, you will experience the chilly and windy weather on top of mountains such as Mount Carmel, Tabor, Sinai and Zion, and descend to the Valley of Jezreal, and you will get to Tiberias, Nazareth and Cana. Further, you will pass by what was once the famous city of Jericho, to the city of En Gedi (pronounced: En-ge-dai). You will get to the city of Capernaum, set sail on the Sea of Galilee, the River Jordan and the Dead Sea. You will enter the Garden of Gethsemane (pronounced: Geth-se-ma-ne), and even see the Tomb of King David. All of this is covered in the first six chapters of the book. This is the crux of *Twelve Pilgrims*. The remaining six chapters, with the exception of Chapter Eleven, may be considered anecdotal. Chapter Eleven (is wrongly listed on the Table of Contents as Chapter Ten and Ten as Eleven) is significant because it reflects on their experiences on the pilgrimage, its impact on their lives as well as their conduct while there as constituting a "moral compass."

Reading into *Twelve Pilgrims*

George Eliot once remarked that

"It is a narrow mind which cannot look at a subject from various points of view."

So, what are the possible points of view that readers can tease out from *Twelve Pilgrims*? Various.

The Social

Twelve Pilgrims is written as a travelogue, with events documented according to each day, following a chronological timeline. So, for the reader who is fascinated with the experiences such as the sights and sounds, the culinary delights, the topography and feel of the people of Palestine, there is enough to satisfy him or her. Take the following experience of climbing Mount Sinai:

At 4:00 a.m., we arrived at the peak of the holy Mount Sinai, amidst intense cold. Some European and African pilgrims including members of the Nigeria Federal delegation had arrived before us. Some had also taken position to witness the outing of the sun. The

Seeing Through the Eyes of the Voyager
(A Review of *Twelve Pilgrims*)

European pilgrims came with powerful telescopic cameras to capture the shooting out of the sun. On our part we joined the rest and enthusiastically set our eyes on the eastern direction not to miss the miracle and glory of the sun rise (p. 82).

Reading the above passage from our context in this part of West Africa, it is at once fascinating that the sun was expected to rise at 4:00am, and pilgrims were already out on the mountain to witness it. More importantly, note the use of the expressions “*the outing of the sun*” and “*the shooting out of the sun.*” These unusual expressions used to describe the sunrise add to both the vivid imagistic portrayal of the sunrise, as well as the sense of wonder of the phenomena as felt by the pilgrims. The sense of overall awe can be seen from the description of the food: “After the sumptuous lunch, our first meal in Israel, we embarked on an upward journey to Mt. Carmel” (p. 16). It is clear that, although this meal very likely consisted of a dish that was new, it was nevertheless “sumptuous,” a true reflection of an appreciative disposition.

The Historical

The book is an eyewitness account of a tour of the holy land. Nevertheless, it contains an amazing degree of historical material. This is all the more intriguing because, in the words of the author, “most of the information obtained from our tour guide constitutes the bulk of this work” (ix). Of course, reading through the book, it is clear that considerable research was also involved to augment the eyewitness account as well as the information from the tour guide.

This is another possible reading of the book for those whose interest is in curating the historicity of the Holy Land. Such a reader will find *Twelve Pilgrims* especially authentic because it records history without the conscious trappings for doing so. Thus, the information is actually contemporary history, frozen in time.

The Religious

By virtue of the voyage that gave birth to the book, as well as the actors involved, and the prevailing tone of the author, most would conclude that this is primarily a testament to faith. Those who read faith and belief into the book are justified, for there is abundant evidence to justify such a reading. Examples are so replete that it would be needless to isolate any to instantiate the point here.

Needless to say, much of the religious aspects of the interpersonal activities of the group in the holy land, aside from visiting landmarks, were essentially political and emancipatory. That brings us to the fourth point

The Political

Throughout the book, the plight of the Bassa community of Toto Local Government Area is highlighted and kept in focus. The author says,

“while in Jerusalem we prayed for the home return of the Bassa community of Toto Local Government Area in Nasarawa State, Nigeria, who were displaced as a result of inter-ethnic clashes with one of their neighbours in 1996/97” (ix).

The account continues,

“These prayers were repeated everyday throughout our stay. Part of the resolution on the displaced Bassa community which I belong was that, ‘like the Jews, the Bassa will return home from exile, people will like them, and be established people’” (x).

Indeed, the link between the people of Nasarawa State and the displaced Jews of pre-Christian times has wider implications. Given that even now, some people of the state are displaced, the larger message of the book appears to be a quest for liberation; a quest that requires a modern day Moses. Not only does this call for prayer require collective resolve and unity, it is a yearning for the good things

Seeing Through the Eyes of the Voyager
(A Review of *Twelve Pilgrims*)

of this modern Promised Land: the metaphoric “milk and honey,” the ‘cucumbers, garlic and watermelons.’

It is in this reading that *Twelve Pilgrims* can be said to have come at a most opportune time. Readers will have to reflect on their roles as individuals and as communities. Each person must ask himself/herself the question: ‘Am I determined to embark on the wilderness trek that will lead me and my people to the Promised Land, or am I too afraid of the unknown to take this decisive step?’

This sense of collective resolve and a strong common voice is shown in many ways in the book. For one thing, you might find that this is the book with the most robust, comprehensive and all-inclusive acknowledgement you may have read. Everyone is acknowledged. It acknowledges *by name*, 109 persons, including those who worked in the Bassa community and died before the author became an adult. This is aside from organizations (such as the Christian Pilgrims Welfare Board) and institutions. The acknowledgement even includes special thanks “to all those too numerous to mention” for their support. That may include you.

Of course, the book overstretchers itself by embarking on needless history, such as is captured in Chapters 7, 9, and 10. The information in these chapters threatens to take the shine off an otherwise elegant account, and even weakens its otherwise pristine originality. Then there are some technical missteps in a number of places. Most prominent of these is the listing in the Table of Contents of Chapter Eleven as Chapter Ten, and Ten as Eleven.

Is *Twelve Pilgrims* a simple book? Well, the answer depends on which way you look at it. To help you ponder that question, let me share with you a thought expressed by the American author Isaac Asimov:

“It is the obvious which is so difficult to see most of the time. People say ‘It is as plain as the nose on your face.’”

*But how much of the nose on your face can you see,
unless someone holds a mirror up to you?"*

Without a doubt, *Twelve Pilgrims* has held up the mirror to help us see, not just our nose, but even beyond it. And the American basketball player and Coach John Wooden said:

*"If you go as far as you can see, you will then see
enough to go even farther."*

The rest is up to us.