

Bibliodrama as Pilgrimage

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Pilgrims have visited biblical sites in Palestine and Israel since the beginning of the fourth century, when Emperor Constantine's mother, Helena, came to the Holy Land. Helena made extensive research to rediscover the holy sites, for example the site of the Nativity. She also started to build the Nativity church in Bethlehem. In 1372, Saint Birgitta of Sweden made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. After visiting the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and the Nativity Grotto in Bethlehem, she had some of her most famous revelations. In her revelations she shows remarkable ability to envisage the scenes in astonishing detail. She displays deep identification with Mary, mother of Jesus, when she as a young woman gave birth to her firstborn and as a mature woman witnessed his death on a cross. Reading the revelations of Saint Birgitta is like taking part in reenactments in bibliodrama, which are deeply moving.

In the town of Bethlehem, the holy sites have been treasured and looked after by Christian Palestinians even before Helena arrived. The profession to guide visitors to the Nativity Church and the Shepherds' Field in Beit Sahour has been handed down in certain families from generation to generation until modern times, together with the detailed knowledge of the historical facts relating to these places. The Christian Palestinians in Bethlehem place such importance on this knowledge that they call it The Fifth Gospel, incorporated in their own bodies and minds. "The holy sites are there for the world to see and experience only because we have cared for them and guarded them through the centuries," they say.

In Oct 2013, a pilgrimage to Israel and Palestine was organized by the Bibliodrama Society in Sweden, together with the study-organisation Bilda. The aim was to do bibliodrama around texts from the life of Jesus - from Nativity to Ascension - on the sites that tradition associates with these texts. One of the main issues was how the experiences of the participants would be influenced by the encounter between the site, the text, the bibliodramatic methods and the group. Another purpose of the pilgrimage was to let the participants meet representatives from the different sides in the longstanding conflict of the area and hear their stories. How would this influence the interpretation of the texts? A third and important dimension was to explore the common attitudes of bibliodrama and pilgrimage through the pedagogical planning of the trip. The leaders were Petra Falk, travel pedagogue from Bilda, and Anna Gradin, certified bibliodrama leader. The nine participants came from different parts of Sweden, and I was fortunate to be one of them. Bilda's Swedish Christian Study Centre in Jerusalem was an important prerequisite for the preparations and the planning. The Study Centre has extensive experience in planning tours for study-groups with the aim to give them a deepened and nuanced insight into the culture and history of the area as well as the political and social situation of today.

Preparations

The group process started six weeks before departure through a study-group on Bilda online. Here the participants could learn more about each other, and reflect on important issues like the pilgrimage concept. A bibliodramatic exercise on the Announcement of Virgin Mary was one part of the preparations, which turned out to be the first attempt to do bibliodrama on the internet (see article by

Anna Gradin). The preparations through the study-group online helped to build expectations and to create a good group climate.

Pedagogical frames

The pilgrimage in Jesus' footsteps started in Bethlehem, the town where he was born, and continued via Jericho and the Mountain of Temptations to Jerusalem, the venue of the dramatic events in connection with his crucifixion and death. During the week, the group did ten bibliodramas "on site" lasting from one to one and a half hours. Simple methods with opening round, reading of the text, short roleplays, sharing, writing and closing round were varied by the bibliodrama leader so that every bibliodrama felt special.

Every morning began with a session consisting of the theme of the day, checkup round, body warm-up and information about the programme for the coming day. In the evenings, the group also gathered for reflection about the experiences of the day. As an effective warm-up before the evening sessions, Anna used her "magical wound-up scarves", which always enticed the participants to play and dance, even if we were ever so tired after an intense day. During the evening sessions creative activities were offered with the help of materials such as textiles, coloured cardboard, ribbons, buttons, scissors, glue, crayons etcetera.

Calling

On an early Sunday morning the group and the leaders met at Arlanda airport. After check-in we gathered for the first circle, and the anticipations were high. A little oldfashioned box with the theme Calling was sent round. Yes, we all felt called and had consented to the adventure ahead of us.



Our pilgrimage in Jesus' footsteps started with two days of remarkable experiences in Bethlehem, where we stayed at the beautiful guest house run by the Birgitta sisters. Our guide Salim generously

shared from his own heart the plight of the Christian Palestinians and their contributions to safeguarding the holy sites. New perspectives to understanding the story of the birth of Jesus were opened up.

The first bibliodrama took place on the hillsides of the small neighbouring town Beit Sahour. The name means “Those who sleep late at night” referring to the shepherds. Reading the text from Luke 1:46-55 we could see the olive trees in the valley, some of them perhaps two-thousand years old, having been harvested from generation to generation. Each of us picked a cross of olive wood and some sandpaper. Sitting by the root of an olive tree, my hands smoothed the rough edges of the wooden cross, while the sun was slowly setting over the little town of Bethlehem and a lonely star showed in the sky. As we gathered in a circle, each of us could dip a tissue into a bowl of Salim’s freshly harvested olive oil and rub it into the wooden cross, giving it a golden hue. All the crosses were different due to the special grains in the olive wood. The crosses would accompany us during the rest of the pilgrimage and play an important role during our walk on Via Dolorosa.



The pilgrim’s key-words

During the first evening session, Anna placed a pink cotton bag on the floor. On top of it she put out small laminated many-coloured cards representing the pilgrim’s seven key-words – spirituality, slowness, freedom, simplicity, light-heartedness, sharing and silence. We were invited to pick the key-word that felt relevant there and then and tell the group why we had chosen it. Every following evening there was a moment to reflect on what had happened to the chosen key-word, a wonderful way to actualize the blessings that come with the attitudes of a pilgrim, closely related to the attitudes of bibliodrama. In that way the key-words opened up a special dimension to the individual experiences in the group.

Birth

Birth was the theme of the following Monday, during which our guide Salim shared the secrets of The Fifth Gospel, the oral tradition that has been kept for centuries by the Christians in Bethlehem. Two bibliodramas took place this day. The group first visited Shepherds' Field in Beit Sahour, the place where the shepherds, according to the tradition, heard the angels' choir. Salim showed us the 22nd Israeli settlement on the opposite hillside. The doubly barbed tarmac road leading to the settlement cuts the landscape like a knife. "A shepherds' culture has existed here for more than three-thousand years", Salim said. Maybe even David as a young boy herded his sheep in this valley." He led us into a large grotto, which has been used for thousands of years as shelter for shepherds and their flock. Here the group created a play on the text from Luke 2:8-20. I chose the role as Mary's heart, where there seemed to be room for the whole cosmos, as angels were singing lullabies to the newborn baby.



Sitting on the hillside with a view to the settlement on the other side of the hill and the barbed "barrier", the group had some time for writing. I was filled with split emotions. How long will it be before the peace that the angels were singing about, will become a reality in the biblical land? These emotions were strongly emphasized when the group travelled on to see the eight-metre high wall surrounding the town of Bethlehem. The messages of the graffiti on the wall felt like a fist in my belly.

In the late afternoon the group returned to the Nativity church. In the throng of endless lines of pilgrims, we had a few seconds to watch the three sites in the Nativity Grotto, the eight-pointed star where the child was born, the manger where he slept and the altar where the three sages placed their gifts. Although the moment was short, it aroused strong feelings in me that followed into the next bibliodrama. This took place in the courtyard of the church. The day ended with singing pilgrimage

songs in the beautiful grotto chapel of the Birgitta sisters. Light-heartedness, the key-word I chose the evening before, seemed to have no relevance after the disturbing experiences of the day.

Confirmation

The plan for Tuesday was to proceed from the birth of Jesus to the beginning of his public work, the baptism in the river Jordan and the temptation in the desert – a time-lapse of thirty years.

Unfortunately the road to the orthodox baptism site on the river Jordan was closed, so the group travelled on to the Mount of Temptation outside Jericho, where Jesus, according to tradition, spent forty days in the desert without eating and drinking. The group walked along the dusty hillside road in the middle of the day. It was extremely hot. I felt the tiredness and slowness in my body. The walk became a real warm-up for the bibliodrama on the three temptations in the desert (Matthew 4:1-11), which actually took place in a restaurant. The experiences took me back to the deserts of my own life: times with no visible roads, emptiness, draught, thirst and deficiency. At the same time the confirmation from the baptism text “you are my beloved son/daughter” underlined the identity of love, the short version of the gospel.



The journey went on to Jerusalem, the city that Jesus visited several times together with his disciples. Inner images came up of the disciples travelling by foot up to the hills of Jerusalem. Probably it was a strenuous walk. But the city had its enchantment – both then and now. In Jerusalem we also stayed in the guest house of the Birgitta sisters. After the walk in the desert, slowness became my new key-word. Strong feelings around the vulnerability of the Palestinians stayed with me after the encounter with the wall in Bethlehem the day before.

Assignment

Wednesday morning the group visited the Christian Study Centre close to the Jaffa gate in the

Christian quarters of the Old City. From the roof there was a fantastic view over the city with the Mount of Olives at the horizon and the magnificent Dome of the Rock in the centre. I couldn't stop being fascinated by its beauty.

The Mount of Olives is often mentioned in the gospels as a place where Jesus and his disciples went to withdraw from the noise of the city. Our next stop was the Pater Noster Church on top of the mount. Along the walls of the church and its inner courtyard, Our Lord's Prayer is engraved in glazed tiles in all the different languages of mankind. In me this awakened the biblical vision that Jerusalem will one day be the city where all nations will gather in peace. I even found the prayer in Marathi, my Indian childhood language. The group conducted a bibliodrama on Our Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13) in a grotto beneath the Byzantine church. Tradition says that the grotto was a place where the first Christians gathered. "Let your kingdom come", was the phrase that I chose to work with through movement and writing. "Let the kingdom of peace come to this city" became my prayer.



From the Mount of Olives the group walked down to the Garden of Gethsemane, just like Jesus and his disciples often did. We had twenty minutes to visit the garden and "the silent witnesses" – the olive trees that might have witnessed Jesus praying in agony, before he was betrayed by one of his own disciples. It would have been difficult to do bibliodrama in this garden because of all the pilgrims crowding there. Instead, Anna had booked us into a garden on the opposite side of the street. In this garden, the group played scenes from Luke 22:39-46 with the roles Jesus, the disciple and the angel. During the play it was obvious that all participants found themselves right in their own garden of Gethsemane. Afterwards there was a moment to reflect in writing. To me it became obvious that life goes on here and now, even on the site where Jesus prayed in agony two-thousand years ago. So many people every day and all over the world experience difficulties, injustices, degradation, insecurity, separation and violence. The memories from the visit to Bethlehem kept popping up. So what is the

assignment? The assignment is to be a witness to the struggle of people in despair – just like the olive trees in Gethsemane – and not to be quiet about it. As we got to know each other in the group, I felt my key-word increasingly focused on sharing.

Relations

The focus of Thursday's programme was to learn more about the Jewish faith. In the morning we were guided through the Jewish parts of Jerusalem by a Swedish guide, Sara. Sara converted to the Jewish faith during her studies and has lived in Jerusalem for about ten years. It was a privilege for the group to benefit from her perspectives and experiences that she shared generously with us. The walk that took us from the Western Wall and the Ramban Synagogue over the Gate of Sion up to the old train station gave us insights in Jewish orthodox spirituality. During lunch at the Kitchen Store, Sara encouraged us to ask questions about the Jewish faith. She was open-minded and ready to discuss all the difficult issues. Being a lawyer of international law, she didn't hide her own split feelings about "the barrier". "Still, it is a fact that there have been no suicide attacks in Jerusalem since the building of the barrier in 2006," she explained. "However, for the orthodox Jews it is important to live in safety in a state of their own, where they can live according to their religion."

In the afternoon, the group was invited to do bibliolog together with some Jewish participants at Elijah Interfaith Institute, a Jewish organization that works for interreligious dialogue locally and globally. The short bibliolog was led by Yael Untermann, whom I had met in Krakow during the BASICS conference in May 2013. What really touched the Swedish participants was when Yael invited us to go into the role of the city of Jerusalem. What does the city experience today? One of the Swedish participants sat in the "empty chair" and gave an interpretation of the agony of the divided and tortured city. In this way she formulated the difficult feelings that were stirring within our group.

In the evening we gathered at the Christian Study Centre to listen to two people from the organization 'Bereaved Families', families who have lost one of their members as a result of the ongoing violence in Jerusalem. In the organization people meet from both sides of the conflict. Two and two they go out and tell their personal story and pledge for mutual peace and understanding. This evening we could hear the stories of a Jewish man and a Muslim woman who had lost family members through a suicide attack and an unlawful military assault. For me the encounter with these two became the most important experience and the most explicit sign of hope of the whole visit. So many thoughts had been aroused during the day. I was deeply touched by Sara's story about the importance of the regular prayers, blessings and Scripture readings in the life of an orthodox Jew. I remembered her saying: "We Jews believe that all nations will gather in peace in Jerusalem. We don't know how it will happen, but we believe that it will happen one day." Spirituality became my key-word for the day, but a spirituality full of contradictions and dualities.

Letting go

On Friday the group would walk Via Dolorosa, as pilgrims have walked it since the days of the Crusaders. "Bring your wooden crosses," Anna had instructed at breakfast. We were going to follow Jesus on his road of suffering, in silence and slowness. The road consists of fourteen stations from the confinement to his death by Pilate to the burial of his body. With the theme 'Letting go' in our hearts we walked in single line to the Lion's Gate. It already felt that we went into our own processes, but did it as a group that had become close. Below the Lion's Gate we formed a tight circle. Anna read the first text and we sang a song that would be repeated at every station.

So we went – in single line and in silence – from one station to the other. Each of us carried the wooden cross from the first day's bibliodrama. At every station we gathered closely, like one body,

while Anna read the texts from the gospels, we took a pulse or made a gesture and sang our song, After the first station Anna encouraged us to think of a role, a person or a thing, and to find out what this role experienced during the walk. It took a while before I found my role. At the fourth station, when Jesus meets his mother for the first time, I realized which role I had already unconsciously identified with, the role of Mary. I lived through Mary's pain when she sees her son being beaten up and she knows that he must die, as well as the pain of Jesus who puts his mother through this unbearable pain by following his calling.



The eighth station memorizes how Jesus turned to the women following him saying: “Daughters of Jerusalem, don’t cry for me. Cry for yourselves and your children.” When we arrived here, we were tired from the walking and the inner emotions. So we stood in a line to give each other a shoulder massage. For the eleven women in our group the identification with the daughters of Jerusalem was strong. Before the ninth station we took a break to have something to eat and drink. The feelings in the group showed that we were all in the middle of our own Via Dolorosa, where we sat with our wooden crosses in our hands. After the long silence and the common but still individual experiences, the group had been closely knit together and felt like one body. If someone was sad, she received a comforting hand over her back or a hug. Closeness, empathy and sharing, in silence and simplicity.

Via Dolorosa ends in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. After passing the station of the crucifixion, we had some time for reflection and writing. Again outside the church we gathered in small groups for reflection on our experience of walking Via Dolorosa. Strong feelings were expressed and shared. Finally each of the small groups was invited to explore what happened, when their crosses met in a reenactment. The dancing and playing crosses evoked different feelings, it was beautiful, joyful and extremely touching. This exercise ended the cross theme of Via Dolorosa. The afternoon was free. At

six we gathered at the Western Wall to experience the beginning of the Sabbath, before we went to enjoy a festive meal in the Christian quarters.

Resurrection

Early Saturday morning we left the Birgitta sisters and rode in our bus to the Garden Tomb (Gordon's Golgatha), which is on the road to Jericho. We were introduced to the history of this beautiful garden by a Swedish guide. Many believe that this was the place where Jesus was buried. After visiting one of the antique tombs with the inscription "He is risen, he is not here", the group joined in a corner of the garden to conduct a bibliodrama on the text about the three women who come to anoint Jesus' dead body with oils and fragrant spices (Mark 16:1-8). In three groups we reenacted the story. The women were on their way to the grave. The practical discussion on what oils and spices have been brought, who had packed the comb and the linen bandages became a way for the women to handle their grief. Three strong scenes about love, solidarity and women's fellowship were dramatized. We finished by celebrating Holy Communion by the sharing of bread and wine in a simple way. The visit to the Garden Tomb ended the mind-blowing events in Jerusalem. We continued our journey to Jericho, where we checked into the four star Hotel Intercontinental. For an afternoon and a night, the pilgrims from Sweden turned into foreign tourists, who enjoyed a swim in the pool and an exquisite evening buffet.



Ascension

The last bibliodrama took place in totally different surroundings, in a gigantic conference room with Oriental carpeting and enormous crystal chandeliers. The text was about the ascension of Jesus (Acts 1:3-11) and the group developed a play with roles of disciples, angels and white clouds. In the pause Anna placed all the texts from the week in a long row on the Oriental carpets together with the theme of each day and other relating symbols. Now the group was invited to create something from the

existing materials and place this beside the texts that had touched us especially. Energetic creativity began. I decorated hearts to be placed on the text about the shepherds and on Via Dolorosa. My wooden cross I placed on Our Lord's Prayer. When we were all finished, we were invited to walk along Memory Lane and express what had become important for us in connection with the bibliodramas of the week. Since we had already shared so much together, it wasn't difficult to recognize the processes that the individuals had gone through. Each and every one of us had made their own journey from Nativity to Ascension. For me the identification with Mary, mother of Jesus, was the most important part and this process started already during the netbased bibliodrama before the group had even met.



Afterthoughts

"I can't think of a better way to see the biblical sites," one of the participants said after the journey. My impression is that all the ingredients of the journey blended together in an exceptional way. The sites themselves worked as an effective warm-up for the bibliodramas. The bibliodrama leader even felt that the site became her partner. The biblical texts about the life of Jesus were contextualized by the surroundings and the generous inputs from our guides and other people we met. Stories from both sides of the conflict underlined the complexity of the political and social situation of today. Biblical history blended with the personal lives of the participants. The bibliodrama methods created an atmosphere of empathy and closeness in the group. It became obvious that bibliodrama and pilgrimage are closely related and work seamlessly together.

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Photos: Birgitta Walldén

