

# Journeying through ancient words within transformative, embodied experiences

## Are we there yet in a virtual pilgrimage?

Virtual pilgrimage has emerged as an object of growing critical inquiry as ever more of us seek access to presence-inducing experiences. In virtual places wrought by excited electrons within worlds mediated by light and parallax, we can find ourselves “there.” This sense of being there rather than going there provides an opening for reflection about the power of images in constructing and extending realities, in supporting heritage care, and about the nature of pilgrimage [1]. Anne Bailey critiques the contention that spatial mobility of any particular type is essential in pilgrimage. If speed or mode of mobility is truly flexible, then virtual spatial immersion, while it may be viewed as a distinct or abridged pilgrimage modality, is a pathway to a real experience provoked by our embodied presence. Our eyes and other organs of perception flood us with sensations that lead us to conclude that we are somewhere, and that meaning-filled things are there with us [2]. Such a place offers the possibility of encountering ancient materiality which affords a connection with multiple possible dimensions of authenticity (inherent, based on historical facts, or iconic). The experience of presence provides an opening for belief, inspiration, and attachment to a place *and the things in it*, even reproductions in virtual space. [3] Through a virtual tour, we may overcome issues of access, mobility constraints, and resource consumption while experiencing something quite authentic for ourselves as we exercise agency in a virtual place.

## Invitation to a place of pilgrimage

You are invited to perform an auto-ethnography and assess whether an authentic engagement in a place of pilgrimage can be your experience. The portal for this experimental determination is the AnyBook template project. A virtual headset is a means of giving access to an interactive manuscript of that most famous book, the Bible, in an immersive, 3-D virtual space. In this experience, you encounter the oldest, complete copy of the Hebrew Bible, the Leningrad Codex. While wearing the widely available and popular Quest 2 headset (or other headsets), a person may read virtual parchment pages of Genesis in real-time. The experience of page-turning depends on a material physics simulation of parchment while simultaneously accessing multi-lingual translation. These affordances appear in a virtual spaces that can be chosen for their relevance to the manuscript’s content or historical provenance. Aural enhancements, such as ancient musical compositions, also can inhabit the space. In this way, a person experiences a manuscript without imperiling it by rough treatment or slipshod environmental controls. This ancient Bible journeyed from Cairo to St. Peterburg during the past 1000 years and it now is curated as Firkovich B19 A in the National Library of Russia. In the Book of Genesis virtual experience linked here, you find yourself reading in a 360 panoramic space in the Ukraine, in a shul where many go to remember the Ba’al Shem Tov, Rabbi Israel Ben Eliezer, founder of Hasidism. His legacy is a thread in Judaism that sees God everywhere and in everything one does.[5] You are invited to see what you experience in reading a virtual text.

## References:

- [1] Bailey, A. E. (2023) Journey or Destination? Rethinking Pilgrimage in the Contemporary World. *Religions* 14(9):1157.
- [2] Tran, M.K. and Davies, A. (2025) The hybrid authenticity of virtual pilgrimage. *Marketing theory*, 25(1) 139-163.
- [3] Benjamin, W. (1968) The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. In: H. Zohn and H. Arendt (eds) *Illumination*. New York, NY: Schocken Books.
- [4] Wang, D. et al. (2024). “What Is the Most Influential Authenticity of Beliefs, Places, or Actions...?” *Sustainability* 16(1):431
- [5] Biale, D. et al. (2017) Hasidism: A New History. Princeton University Press.

Author: Lynn Swartz Dodd  
University of Southern California  
swartz@usc.edu



← Leningrad Codex

Book of Hours →



Please point your smartphone’s camera at a QR Code above to access a video of the immersive experience inside the virtual reality headset. Right QR code is for the Book of Hours (image of 2-D page shown to the right). The left QR code links to a video in which pages in the book of Genesis turn in 3-D real-time with simulated material physics and text translation.

In order to create your own manuscript experience, please point your smartphone’s camera at the QR Code below to access the virtual manuscript template creation files that are posted in a publicly-accessible Google Drive folder. These files are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) License by the authors



The image shown behind the text of this poster is taken inside the Meta Quest 2 headset. The virtual space is a 360 panoramic image. The parchment simulation in this linked version uses ObiSoft, a Unity plug-in. The pages may be turned using Quest controllers or with natural hand navigation.



Above: 2-D digital photographs of manuscripts (shown above is a Book of Hours held in USC Libraries’ Special Collections, MS Z105.5 1450 C378). Scans are transformed through a drag-and-drop Unity project to derive a 3-D immersive, virtual experience without significant prior technical training.

## Legacy Images Extend Use and Experience

Thousands of manuscripts have been photographed in high resolution by galleries, libraries, archives and museums as committed staff seek to meet mission-critical but competing goals of preservation and access. These two-dimensional page images above are assets with high value that allow scholars and interested members of the public to gain remote access to the appearance, condition, and content of each page. For many, this adequately addresses the competing impulses of access (“I want to closely examine”) and preservation (“I want ensure these last into the future”). For others, virtual access through the AnyBook Experience enhances access and generates enthusiasm which may increase institutional sustainability. Close study of an object has high value but often is beyond easy reach because of distance, politics, fragility, or mobility, or resources. The ability to add self-directed discovery and the agency of exploration offers new means of creating connections with heritage resources and heightens awareness of scale, another key index of authenticity.

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