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From Spiritual Practice to Economic Asset: Sacred Travel and Regional Development in Limpopo, South Africa

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Sacred travel represents an important yet under-measured dimension of tourism and regional development in South Africa. This study examines the potential contribution of the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) Easter pilgrimage to Moria, Limpopo Province, to regional economic development. Using a qualitative narrative review approach, the study synthesises scholarly literature, official tourism statistics and documentary evidence to examine the economic pathways, livelihood opportunities and sustainability challenges associated with large-scale pilgrimage. The analysis is guided by Tourism Multiplier Theory, the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework and Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle model. The study conceptualises pilgrimage as generating visitor expenditure that may stimulate economic linkages in transport, trade, retail and accommodation, with potential effects on local income, employment, micro-enterprise development and broader regional economic activity. However, the findings indicate that the developmental benefits of sacred travel are neither automatic nor necessarily locally retained. Economic leakages, unequal participation, inadequate infrastructure, environmental pressures, security requirements, seasonality and governance challenges may constrain its contribution to inclusive development. Historical evidence confirms that the Moria pilgrimage has generated substantial economic effects, while recent evidence demonstrates its continuing significance as a major source of religious mobility. Nevertheless, there remains insufficient contemporary destination-level evidence on pilgrim expenditure, local business turnover, employment, household income, economic leakages, and public infrastructure costs. The study, therefore, avoids assigning a contemporary monetary value to the pilgrimage and instead identifies the conditions under which sacred travel may function as a regional development asset. It concludes that the developmental value of the Moria pilgrimage depends on strengthening local economic participation and expenditure retention, improving destination governance and infrastructure, managing environmental and social pressures, and safeguarding the sacred destination's spiritual and cultural integrity. The study highlights the need for future primary research to measure the magnitude, distribution and sustainability of pilgrimage-related economic benefits and costs.

Keywords: *Sacred travel; religious tourism; pilgrimage; ZCC; Moria; regional development; local economic development; livelihoods; tourism multiplier; Limpopo*

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Introduction

Sacred travel is an established form of human mobility and an increasingly relevant dimension of contemporary tourism. Pilgrimage generally involves journeys motivated by religious devotion, spiritual fulfilment and participation in sacred practices, while religious tourism encompasses a broader range of travel associated with religious sites, events, heritage and cultural experiences. Beyond their spiritual significance, these forms of mobility generate flows of visitors, expenditure, and services that can influence destination economies, local enterprises, and community livelihoods. Recent tourism scholarship increasingly emphasises the importance of understanding these effects in relation to local participation, stakeholder engagement and sustainable destination development (Nilsson & Aquino 2021, Pisarović et al. 2025).

The economic significance of religious travel is increasingly evident in South Africa. The *Domestic Tourism Performance Report* for the second quarter of 2025 indicates that religious travel accounted for 15.2% of domestic overnight trips, compared with 5.5% in the corresponding quarter of 2024, while expenditure associated with religious tourism increased from R599.3 million to R2.5 billion. The report identifies the return of the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) Easter pilgrimage to Moria in April 2025 as an important contributor to this increase. These figures indicate that religious travel has become a substantial component of domestic tourism. However, national and provincial statistics provide limited information about how this expenditure is distributed across local households, formal businesses, informal enterprises, transport operators and external suppliers.

This distinction is important because tourism activity does not necessarily translate automatically into inclusive local development. The economic contribution of tourism depends partly on the participation of host communities, the strength of local supply chains and the extent to which expenditure is retained within the destination. Research published in the *Athens Journal of Tourism* highlights the importance of stakeholder participation and local involvement in shaping tourism outcomes, particularly in rural destinations (Nilsson & Aquino 2021, Thetsane 2019). Similarly, recent evidence from rural tourism demonstrates that tourism can contribute to income diversification and employment, while benefits may remain constrained by inadequate infrastructure, limited skills, and unequal access to tourism opportunities (Yeboah et al. 2025). These insights are particularly relevant to pilgrimage destinations where visitor concentrations may be large but highly seasonal.

The ZCC Easter pilgrimage to Moria provides an important context for examining the relationship between sacred travel and local economic development. After a five-year interruption associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, the pilgrimage resumed in April 2025. The Public Utility Transport Corporation (PUTCO), a major South African bus operator, reported transporting approximately 30,000 ZCC pilgrims using nearly 500 buses during the pilgrimage period. Although these figures illustrate the considerable scale of pilgrimage-related mobility, they do not provide a direct measure of its economic impact. In particular, they do not reveal average expenditure per pilgrim, total revenue generated at Moria, employment created, turnover among local enterprises, tax contributions, or the proportion of pilgrimage-related expenditure retained within surrounding communities. The key analytical challenge, therefore, is not the absence of evidence demonstrating the significance of religious travel, but the limited availability of disaggregated, destination-level data needed to assess how pilgrimage-generated economic activity is distributed and translated into local development.

Historical evidence nevertheless demonstrates that pilgrimage can generate substantial regional economic linkages. Saayman et al. (2014) found significant production and household income effects associated with the ZCC pilgrimage to Moria, particularly in trade and accommodation, transport and communication, and financial and business services. However, those estimates pertain to the 2011 pilgrimage and should not be interpreted as evidence of Moria's contemporary economic value. The present study, therefore, distinguishes between documented historical impacts and potential contemporary economic pathways, avoiding the attribution of current monetary values in the absence of primary destination-level data.

The relevance of this issue extends beyond expenditure to local livelihoods and enterprise participation. Pilgrimage periods can create temporary markets for food vendors, transport operators, accommodation providers, retailers and producers of religious merchandise. Such opportunities may contribute to income diversification and local enterprise development, particularly in rural communities. Recent AJT research similarly shows that tourism can create employment, stimulate purchases of local products and support community income, while inadequate infrastructure and unequal access to tourism opportunities can constrain these benefits (Yeboah et al. 2025). The developmental outcome, therefore, depends not simply on the number of visitors but on the extent to which local enterprises participate in tourism value chains.

At the same time, large-scale sacred travel can generate costs and competing pressures. Concentrated visitor flows can place additional demands on roads, transport systems, water and sanitation, waste management, emergency services and public safety. Tourism scholarship increasingly emphasises the need to assess these pressures alongside economic benefits and to incorporate environmental governance, stakeholder coordination and destination sustainability into tourism planning (Nilsson & Aquino 2021, Pisarović et al. 2025, Toanoglou et al. 2025). In addition, commercial expansion around sacred spaces may create tensions between economic activity and the religious and cultural meanings attached to the destination. Sustainable development therefore requires a balance between economic opportunities, community interests, environmental management and the preservation of sacred values.

The research gap addressed by this study consequently extends beyond the general observation that religious tourism is under-researched. Although national statistics demonstrate the growing importance of religious travel in South Africa, limited systematic evidence connects the scale of pilgrimage mobility at Moria with destination-level expenditure, local economic retention, informal enterprise development, livelihood outcomes, economic leakages and infrastructure and environmental costs. The existing evidence demonstrates that Moria can generate substantial economic activity, but it remains unclear how this activity is distributed, how much value is retained locally and whether pilgrimage contributes to sustained and inclusive regional development.

Against this background, the study examines sacred travel as a potential regional development asset in Limpopo Province, using the ZCC Easter pilgrimage to Moria as the principal case. The study addresses four research questions:

RQ1: What economic pathways are associated with sacred travel and the ZCC Easter pilgrimage to Moria in Limpopo Province?
RQ2: How does pilgrimage-related activity contribute to local livelihoods, informal-sector participation and micro-enterprise development?
RQ3: What infrastructural, environmental, security, governance and social challenges constrain the sustainable development of sacred travel in Limpopo?
RQ4: To what extent can sacred travel be conceptualised as a regional economic development asset in Limpopo Province?

Correspondingly, the study aims to: (i) examine the economic pathways through which sacred travel contributes to regional economic activity; (ii) assess its implications for livelihoods, informal enterprises and local economic participation; (iii) critically examine the infrastructural, environmental, security, governance and social challenges associated with large-scale pilgrimage; and (iv) develop a balanced conceptualisation of sacred travel as a potential regional development asset.

The study adopts a qualitative narrative review integrating tourism multiplier theory, the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework and Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle model. Given the absence of current primary expenditure and household-level data, the study does not claim to calculate the total economic impact of the Moria pilgrimage. Rather, it synthesises available scholarly literature, official tourism evidence and documented cases to identify economic pathways, opportunities and constraints. This limitation is important: future empirical studies using pilgrim surveys, household interviews, enterprise surveys and expenditure data will be necessary to estimate expenditure per pilgrim, employment effects, local multipliers, economic leakages, distributional outcomes and the costs imposed on host communities.

The study contributes to the literature by moving beyond the assumption that pilgrimage automatically generates development benefits. It examines how economic benefits may circulate, who captures them, what limits their retention within host communities, and what social, environmental, infrastructural and governance costs accompany large-scale sacred mobility. Sacred travel is consequently conceptualized not as an inherently beneficial form of tourism, but as a conditional development opportunity whose contribution to inclusive regional development depends on local economic participation, expenditure retention, effective destination management, environmental sustainability, and the protection of the spiritual and cultural integrity of sacred places.

Literature Review

Sacred Travel, Religious Tourism and Regional Development

Sacred travel occupies an important position within tourism scholarship because it combines religious motivations with economic, social and cultural processes. Pilgrimage traditionally refers to travel undertaken for spiritual, devotional or ritual purposes, whereas religious tourism encompasses a broader range of activities associated with sacred places, religious events and cultural heritage (Timothy & Olsen 2006, Raj & Griffin 2021). Although the primary motivation for pilgrimage may be spiritual rather than recreational, pilgrims consume transport, accommodation, food, retail and other services, creating economic linkages within destination economies (Olsen 2021, Griffin & Raj 2017). Religious tourism can therefore contribute to regional development by connecting visitor mobility with local markets, employment and enterprise opportunities.

The economic effects of tourism are commonly explained through multiplier processes. Visitor expenditure generates direct effects through purchases made by tourists, indirect effects through local suppliers, and induced effects when tourism-related incomes are subsequently spent within the economy (Archer 1982, Fletcher 1989). Applied to pilgrimage, these mechanisms suggest that expenditure on transport, food, accommodation, religious goods and other services can stimulate economic activity beyond the immediate sacred site. However, the magnitude of these effects depends on the strength of local supply chains and the extent to which expenditure is retained locally. High levels of economic leakage, external ownership and dependence on imported goods can substantially reduce the developmental benefits accruing to host communities (Archer 1995, Tyrrell & Johnston 2006).

This perspective is particularly relevant to rural pilgrimage destinations such as Moria, where large temporary visitor flows may generate substantial demand but do not necessarily translate into equivalent long-term local development. The literature therefore suggests that visitor numbers alone are insufficient indicators of economic impact. Attention should also be given to expenditure patterns, local procurement, employment, enterprise participation and the distribution of benefits among community members.

Pilgrimage, Livelihoods and Local Enterprise

Tourism can contribute to livelihood diversification by creating opportunities for households to combine formal employment with self-employment, informal trading and other income-generating activities (Ashley et al. 2007, Scheyvens 2007). The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework is useful in this context because it conceptualises livelihoods as dependent on access to different forms of capital, including financial, human, physical, social and natural capital (Scoones 1998). Pilgrimage destinations can provide temporary markets in which households mobilise these resources through food vending, transportation, accommodation, retailing and craft production.

However, livelihood benefits are not necessarily equally distributed. Access to pilgrimage-related markets may depend on capital availability, location, social networks, licensing arrangements and relationships with destination authorities. Consequently, larger businesses and externally based operators may capture a disproportionate share of expenditure, while local informal traders may remain concentrated in low-margin and highly seasonal activities. Tourism scholarship consequently emphasises the importance of community participation, local ownership and institutional support if tourism is to contribute to inclusive development (Scheyvens 1999, Tosun 2000).

For Limpopo, this literature highlights an important distinction between economic activity generated by pilgrimage and developmental benefits retained by host communities. The presence of traders and service providers around Moria demonstrates market activity, but does not by itself establish the scale, durability or distribution of livelihood benefits. This reinforces the need for destination-level empirical research capable of examining household income, enterprise turnover, employment and expenditure retention.

Pilgrimage, Destination Development and Infrastructure

The Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) provides a useful framework for understanding how destinations respond to changes in visitor volumes and investment over time (Butler, 1980). Rapid increases in visitor numbers can stimulate infrastructure development, commercialisation and destination recognition, but excessive concentration of visitors may eventually create congestion, resource pressures and declining destination quality. Although originally developed for conventional tourism destinations, the framework is relevant to pilgrimage destinations where visitor flows can be highly concentrated temporally and spatially.

Large-scale pilgrimage can place considerable pressure on transport networks, water supply, sanitation, waste management, accommodation and emergency services. These pressures may generate public costs that are not captured in conventional measures of tourism expenditure (Hall, 2010; Gössling et al., 2012). Consequently, the assessment of pilgrimage as a regional development mechanism should consider both the economic benefits generated by visitors and the infrastructure and environmental costs borne by host communities and public institutions.

This is particularly important for Moria because pilgrimage activity involves exceptionally large concentrations of visitors within a relatively short period. Such concentration can increase economic opportunities while simultaneously intensifying congestion, waste generation, resource consumption and public-safety requirements. The developmental value of pilgrimage therefore depends partly on destination capacity, planning and governance rather than visitor numbers alone.

Environmental, Social and Security Challenges

The sustainability literature cautions against treating tourism growth as synonymous with development. Intensive visitor concentrations can increase pressure on natural resources, waste systems and local ecosystems, particularly where infrastructure expansion does not keep pace with visitor growth (Gössling 2002, Gössling et al. 2012). Pilgrimage destinations may face similar challenges because religious events often produce highly concentrated periods of mobility and consumption.

Social and security considerations are equally important. Large gatherings can create risks associated with traffic congestion, overcrowding, emergency response and public safety. These challenges require coordination between religious organisations, municipalities, tourism authorities, transport operators and law-enforcement agencies. The literature on sustainable religious tourism therefore increasingly emphasises destination governance and stakeholder coordination rather than focusing exclusively on visitor expenditure (Raj & Griffin 2021).

Furthermore, the economic use of sacred places may create tensions between commercialisation and spiritual authenticity. Commercial activities can enhance local livelihoods and improve services for pilgrims, but excessive commercialisation may commodify religious experiences and alter the cultural meaning of sacred spaces (MacCannell 1976, Cohen 1988). The challenge is consequently to identify forms of commercial activity that support local economic participation without undermining the religious values and cultural identity that attract pilgrims in the first place.

The South African and Limpopo Context

South African scholarship demonstrates that religious tourism can generate significant economic activity while simultaneously raising questions concerning local participation and destination management. Research on pilgrimage has highlighted the capacity of religious gatherings to stimulate transport, trading and other economic activities around sacred destinations (Saayman et al. 2014, Linda 2021, 2024). These studies provide an important foundation for examining Moria as an economic and tourism space rather than solely as a religious site.

Nevertheless, the existing literature remains limited in several respects. First, relatively little recent destination-level evidence quantifies the distribution of pilgrimage expenditure between local households, informal enterprises, formal businesses and external suppliers. Second, insufficient attention has been given to economic leakages and the extent to which pilgrimage-related income translates into sustained livelihood improvements. Third, the social, environmental, infrastructure and security costs associated with very large pilgrimage gatherings remain comparatively underexamined. Finally, the relationship between sacred travel and broader regional development in rural Limpopo has received less attention than the religious and cultural dimensions of pilgrimage.

Research Gap and Conceptual Positioning

The literature therefore establishes that pilgrimage can generate economic activity, diversify livelihoods and stimulate destination development, but it also demonstrates that these outcomes are neither automatic nor evenly distributed. The key gap is not simply the absence of evidence that pilgrimage generates economic benefits; rather, there is insufficient integrated understanding of how pilgrimage expenditure, livelihood opportunities, local economic retention, infrastructure pressures and social and environmental costs interact within a rural destination such as Moria.

This study addresses this gap by bringing together three complementary perspectives. Tourism multiplier theory explains how pilgrimage expenditure can generate direct, indirect and induced economic effects (Archer 1982, Fletcher 1989). The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework explains how pilgrimage-related markets may contribute to household livelihood diversification while recognising unequal access to economic opportunities (Scoones 1998). The Tourism Area Life Cycle model provides a broader destination perspective through which increasing visitor concentration, infrastructure requirements and potential sustainability pressures can be understood (Butler 1980).

Together, these perspectives support a balanced analysis of sacred travel as a potential rather than automatic regional development asset. They also reinforce the need for future primary research involving pilgrims, local households, informal traders, businesses, transport operators and public authorities. Such research would make it possible to quantify expenditure per pilgrim, local business turnover, employment effects, economic leakages, infrastructure costs and the distribution of benefits—dimensions that cannot be reliably established through a narrative review alone.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative narrative review approach to examine how sacred travel, particularly the ZCC Easter pilgrimage to Moria, may contribute to regional economic development in Limpopo. A narrative review is appropriate where the objective is to integrate diverse forms of conceptual, theoretical and empirical evidence to develop an interpretive understanding of a complex phenomenon rather than statistically aggregate comparable findings (Snyder 2019, Green et al. 2024). Narrative synthesis is particularly useful where evidence is heterogeneous in design, context and outcome measures, making meta-analysis inappropriate (Popay et al. 2006, Mays et al. 2005). The approach is also consistent with qualitative tourism research, which is well-suited to examining the social, economic, and contextual dimensions of complex tourism phenomena (Jennings 2001, Mkono 2016).

Literature Identification and Selection

Relevant literature was identified through searches of Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar and institutional and government sources. Search terms included combinations of *sacred travel*, *religious tourism*, *pilgrimage tourism*, *ZCC pilgrimage*, *Moria*, *Limpopo tourism*, *religious tourism and economic development*, *pilgrimage and livelihoods*, *tourism multiplier*, *informal economy*, *sustainable livelihoods* and *tourism destination development*. Reference lists of relevant publications were also examined to identify additional studies.

Priority was given to peer-reviewed scholarly literature, particularly studies addressing religious tourism, pilgrimage, tourism-led economic development, rural livelihoods and destination sustainability. Relevant institutional and government sources were included where they provided recent statistical or contextual evidence not available in academic publications, particularly tourism statistics and information relating to the 2025 Moria pilgrimage. This combination of scholarly and documentary evidence enables the study to connect theoretical perspectives with contemporary developments in Limpopo.

Analytical Framework and Synthesis

The selected literature was analysed thematically around four dimensions corresponding to the research questions: (i) economic impact pathways; (ii) livelihoods and micro-enterprise development; (iii) infrastructure, environmental, governance and social challenges; and (iv) the potential of sacred travel as a regional development asset. Narrative synthesis was used to compare and integrate findings across different studies and evidence types, while recognising differences in research design, geographical context and measurement (Popay et al. 2006, Mays et al. 2005).

Three complementary theoretical perspectives guide the analysis. Tourism multiplier theory is used to examine how pilgrimage expenditure can generate direct, indirect and induced economic effects through local consumption and supply-chain linkages (Archer 1982, Fletcher 1989). The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework is applied to assess how pilgrimage-related activities may contribute to household income diversification, enterprise development and livelihood resilience (Scoones 1998). Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle model provides a broader destination perspective for considering how increasing visitor flows may influence infrastructure, commercialisation, community participation and destination pressures over time (Butler 1980).

Importantly, the study does not claim to calculate the total economic impact of the Moria pilgrimage. The available evidence does not provide sufficiently disaggregated information on pilgrim expenditure, expenditure per visitor, local business turnover, employment, tax revenues or economic leakages. The analysis therefore uses available quantitative indicators to establish the scale of pilgrimage-related mobility while employing the reviewed literature and theoretical frameworks to interpret potential economic pathways. This distinction prevents theoretical possibilities from being presented as measured economic impacts.

Critical Assessment and Limitations of the Evidence

The review deliberately incorporates both positive and negative dimensions of sacred travel. Evidence concerning employment, enterprise development, local expenditure and livelihood opportunities is considered alongside congestion, infrastructure pressure, waste, environmental impacts, security requirements, unequal distribution of benefits, economic leakages and tensions between commercialisation and spiritual authenticity. This balanced approach is important because tourism development can generate economic benefits while simultaneously producing social, environmental and institutional costs (Sharpley 2000, Saarinen 2006).

A major limitation of this study is the absence of primary data from pilgrims, residents, traders, transport operators, businesses and public authorities, which prevents the estimation of average pilgrim expenditure, visitor numbers, multiplier effects, household income, employment and the distribution of benefits between local and external actors. Future research should therefore use pilgrim expenditure surveys, household and trader surveys, stakeholder interviews and destination-level analyses of expenditure and supply chains to quantify these effects. Nevertheless, the methodology provides a systematic, transparent and critically balanced synthesis of existing evidence, while clearly distinguishing documented economic impacts from theoretically anticipated outcomes in the context of limited contemporary destination-specific data for Moria.

Conceptual Framework

This study conceptualises sacred travel as a potential, rather than automatic, contributor to regional development. The framework integrates Tourism Multiplier Theory (Archer 1982, Fletcher 1989), the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (Scoones 1998), and Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle model (Butler 1980). These perspectives explain how pilgrimage expenditure can stimulate economic activity, create livelihood and enterprise opportunities, while also generating infrastructure, environmental and social pressures.

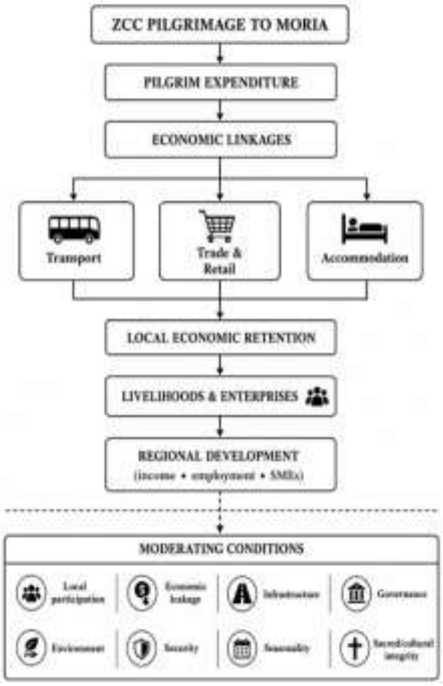
The framework proposes that the ZCC Easter pilgrimage to Moria generates visitor demand and expenditure on transport, accommodation, food, retail and other services. This expenditure can produce direct, indirect and induced economic effects. Where local enterprises participate in pilgrimage-related value chains and expenditure is retained locally, these effects can contribute to employment, income diversification, micro-enterprise development and broader regional economic activity. However, economic leakages, inadequate infrastructure, seasonality, environmental pressures, security challenges and weak governance may reduce these benefits.

Thus, the study conceptualises the relationship as:

Sacred travel → Pilgrim expenditure → Economic linkages → Local economic retention → Livelihood and enterprise outcomes → Regional development

This relationship is influenced by local participation, supply-chain linkages, governance, infrastructure capacity, environmental sustainability, security and the protection of sacred and cultural values.

Figure 1. *Conceptual Framework linking Sacred Travel and Regional Development*



Source: Author's conceptualisation based on Archer (1982), Butler (1980), Fletcher (1989), and Scoones (1998)

The framework, therefore, emphasises that the number of pilgrims alone does not determine the developmental contribution of sacred travel. Rather, regional development depends on the extent to which pilgrimage-generated economic activity is locally retained, equitably distributed and sustainably managed. This provides the conceptual basis for examining Moria as a potential regional development asset while avoiding unsupported claims about its contemporary monetary impact.

Sacred Travel and the Tourism Economy of Limpopo

Limpopo Province occupies an important position within South Africa's domestic tourism economy. The province recorded approximately 8.59 million domestic tourist arrivals in 2023/24, together with R20.1 billion in domestic overnight tourism expenditure and 26.8 million bed nights, making it one of the country's leading domestic tourism destinations (Limpopo Tourism Agency [LTA] 2024). These figures reflect the importance of tourism to the provincial economy and provide the broader context within which sacred travel should be considered. However, aggregate provincial tourism statistics do not adequately distinguish religious travel from other tourism segments, limiting the ability to determine the specific contribution of pilgrimage to local economic development.

Limpopo's tourism economy is traditionally associated with wildlife, nature-based tourism, cultural heritage and leisure travel. Sacred travel represents an additional dimension of this tourism system, particularly through the activities of the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) at Moria. The annual ZCC Easter pilgrimage has historically attracted exceptionally large numbers of participants and has been described as one of the world's largest pilgrimage gatherings. Saayman et al. (2014) estimated that approximately 1.2 million pilgrims attended the 2011 Easter gathering, demonstrating the exceptional scale of religious mobility associated with Moria. Their Social Accounting Matrix analysis further estimated that pilgrimage-related expenditure generated approximately R428.6 million in total production impacts and almost R179.4 million in household-income effects, measured in 2006 prices. The largest production effects occurred in trade and accommodation, transport and communication, and financial and business services.

Subsequent research has also demonstrated that ZCC pilgrims are not a homogeneous group. Kruger and Saayman (2016) identified different pilgrim segments based on motivations including spiritual fulfilment, inner peace, healing, faith exploration, congregational togetherness and religious participation. This finding is economically relevant because differences in pilgrims' motivations, origins, length of stay and behavioural characteristics may influence expenditure patterns and the types of goods and services demanded. Consequently, understanding the economic contribution of pilgrimage requires attention not only to visitor numbers but also to pilgrim characteristics and spending behaviour.

The existing significance of Moria was particularly evident following the resumption of the ZCC Easter pilgrimage in April 2025, after a five-year interruption due to COVID-19. During the pilgrimage, PUTCO reported deploying nearly 500 buses and transporting approximately 30,000 pilgrims to Moria (PUTCO 2025, EWN 2025). At the provincial level, the Limpopo Tourism Agency reported that approximately two million visitors were expected in Limpopo during the broader Easter period; importantly, this figure represents overall Easter visitor activity and should not be interpreted as the number of ZCC pilgrims attending Moria alone (SABC News 2025). These contemporary indicators demonstrate the continuing scale of pilgrimage-related mobility, but they do not provide sufficiently disaggregated evidence on average expenditure per pilgrim, total Moria-specific revenue, local business turnover, employment generated, tax revenue, or the proportion of expenditure retained within surrounding communities. The evidence, therefore, demonstrates substantial mobility without yet providing a reliable contemporary estimate of Moria's destination-level economic contribution.

The economic significance of sacred travel also extends beyond the pilgrimage site itself. Pilgrims require transportation, food, accommodation, retail goods and other services, creating temporary demand across a network of businesses and service providers. Earlier evidence from Moria indicates particularly strong effects in trade, accommodation, transport and communication, suggesting that pilgrimage can connect rural destinations to wider regional supply chains (Saayman et al., 2014). Informal traders and small enterprises may also benefit from increased demand during pilgrimage periods. However, the extent to which these benefits accrue to locally owned enterprises rather than larger external businesses remains insufficiently documented.

The spatial concentration of pilgrimage activity also creates significant pressures. Very large numbers of visitors arriving within a short period can place pressure on roads, traffic management, water, sanitation, waste-management systems, emergency services and public safety. The resources required to manage pilgrimage therefore represent an important part of its regional economic footprint. Moreover, benefits may be unevenly distributed, with some businesses and households gaining substantially while others experience congestion, competition for resources or disruption to normal economic activity. These considerations reinforce the need to assess both the benefits and costs of pilgrimage rather than treating increased visitor numbers as an automatic indicator of development.

Sacred travel in Limpopo should therefore be understood as a significant but incompletely measured component of the provincial tourism economy. Existing research provides convincing evidence of the historical economic effects of the Moria pilgrimage, while contemporary evidence demonstrates that the pilgrimage continues to generate large-scale mobility. Nevertheless, a substantial evidence gap remains concerning its current destination-level economic contribution. In particular, there is insufficient recent evidence on pilgrim expenditure, local economic retention, informal-sector turnover, employment creation, economic leakages and the costs imposed on public infrastructure and communities. Addressing these gaps is essential for determining whether the growing visibility of sacred travel translates into sustained and inclusive regional economic development.

Implications for Regional Economic Development

The evidence reviewed in this section suggests that the economic significance of sacred travel operates through several interconnected pathways: visitor expenditure, transport demand, trade and accommodation, informal enterprise activity, employment and supply-chain linkages. These pathways correspond closely with tourism multiplier theory and the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework developed in previous section. However, the magnitude and distribution of these effects cannot be inferred solely from visitor numbers.

The case of Moria consequently presents an important paradox. On the one hand, the pilgrimage is sufficiently large to generate measurable regional economic effects, as demonstrated by previous empirical research (Saayman et al. 2014). On the other hand, contemporary destination-level information remains insufficient to determine how these benefits are currently distributed or whether they translate into sustained improvements in local livelihoods. Sacred travel should therefore be regarded as a potential regional development asset rather than an inherently beneficial economic activity. Its developmental value depends on local participation, retention of expenditure, infrastructure capacity, effective governance and the management of environmental and social costs.

This distinction is central to the present study. Rather than attempting to assign a new monetary value to the Moria pilgrimage without primary expenditure data, the analysis examines the economic pathways, livelihood opportunities and structural constraints through which sacred travel may influence regional development in Limpopo. This approach also identifies the areas in which future empirical research is required to make the contemporary economic contribution of pilgrimage more precisely measurable.

Economic Impact Pathways of Sacred Travel

Sacred travel can influence regional economies through visitor expenditure, transport, accommodation, retail activity, employment, informal enterprise and supply-chain linkages. Pilgrimage expenditure can generate direct effects through visitors' purchases, indirect effects through local suppliers, and induced effects through subsequent household spending. Recent research on religious tourism similarly identifies expenditure, employment, entrepreneurship and local business activity as important channels through which pilgrimage can contribute to destination economies (Raj & Griffin 2021, Olsen 2021, Linda 2024).

The Moria case demonstrates the potential significance of these linkages. Saayman et al. (2014) estimated that the 2011 ZCC pilgrimage generated approximately R428.6 million in production effects and R179.4 million in household-income effects, with particularly strong effects in trade and accommodation, transport and communication, and financial and business services. Although these estimates provide an important historical benchmark, they should not be interpreted as evidence of Moria's contemporary economic value. Changes in prices, visitor behaviour, infrastructure and regional economic conditions make updated measurement necessary.

The economic significance of pilgrimage also depends on local retention. Expenditure on transport, food, accommodation and retail goods contributes more strongly to regional development when these goods and services are supplied by local enterprises. Conversely, reliance on external suppliers can lead to economic leakage and limit the benefits retained by host communities (Linda 2024). Thus, the number of pilgrims alone provides an inadequate measure of economic impact. What matters is the relationship between visitor expenditure, local production, employment, enterprise participation and income retention.

Pilgrimage can additionally provide opportunities for livelihood diversification, particularly among households and micro-enterprises operating in food vending, retailing, transport, accommodation and craft production. However, these opportunities may be seasonal, competitive and unevenly distributed. Recent scholarship therefore cautions against assuming that tourism growth automatically produces inclusive development, particularly where local enterprises face limited finance, skills, infrastructure and market access (Rogerson 2022, Linda 2024).

The economic benefits of pilgrimage must also be considered alongside its costs. Large visitor concentrations can increase pressure on roads, water, sanitation, waste-management systems, emergency services and public safety. Environmental pressures and congestion may impose costs on host communities and other economic activities, while commercial expansion can create tensions between economic objectives and the spiritual character of sacred destinations (Olsen 2021, Raj & Griffin 2021). Consequently, sacred travel should be understood as a conditional development mechanism, whose contribution depends on local economic linkages, equitable participation and effective destination management.

Importantly, the available evidence does not permit calculation of the contemporary total economic impact of Moria. There are insufficient current data on pilgrim expenditure, local business turnover, employment, household income, economic leakages and public-sector costs. The present study, therefore, examines the pathways and conditions through which sacred travel may influence regional development rather than assigning a new monetary value to the pilgrimage.

Sacred Travel, Livelihoods and Micro-Enterprise Development

One of the most immediate economic effects of large-scale pilgrimage is the creation of temporary markets for goods and services. Pilgrims require food, beverages, transport, accommodation, clothing, religious merchandise and other necessities, creating opportunities for informal traders and small businesses. Religious tourism can therefore contribute to livelihood diversification by providing households with additional sources of income, particularly in rural areas where formal employment opportunities are constrained (Linda 2021, 2024).

At Moria, historical evidence indicates that trade, accommodation and transport have been among the principal sectors benefiting from pilgrimage expenditure (Saayman et al. 2014). These linkages suggest that pilgrimage can connect religious mobility with wider local economic activity. However, the existence of trading opportunities does not necessarily mean that benefits are broadly distributed. Larger businesses and external suppliers may possess greater financial and logistical capacity to capture pilgrimage-related demand, while informal traders may face competition, limited infrastructure and restricted access to formal markets.

Seasonality is another important consideration. Because major pilgrimage activity is concentrated around specific religious events, income from trade may be temporary and unpredictable. Pilgrimage-related activities may therefore supplement rather than replace other household livelihoods. Whether these activities contribute to sustained poverty reduction or enterprise growth cannot be established without household- and business-level evidence.

The developmental value of pilgrimage consequently depends on the extent to which local enterprises are integrated into pilgrimage-related value chains. Access to finance, appropriate trading facilities, business skills, market information and local procurement opportunities could strengthen local participation and increase the proportion of expenditure retained within host communities (Rogerson 2022, Linda 2024). Such interventions, however, should remain sensitive to the religious character of Moria and should not transform a sacred gathering into a purely commercial tourism event.

Infrastructure, Environmental and Social Challenges

The economic opportunities associated with pilgrimage are accompanied by substantial infrastructural and environmental pressures. Large concentrations of visitors over short periods can increase demand for transport, water, sanitation, electricity, healthcare, waste management and emergency services. These pressures are particularly significant in rural destinations where infrastructure capacity may be insufficient for temporary population increases.

Environmental sustainability is similarly important. Large pilgrimages can increase solid-waste generation, water consumption, wastewater production, traffic congestion and pressure on surrounding resources. Without effective planning, these impacts may reduce the destination's long-term attractiveness and sustainability (Olsen 2021, Raj & Griffin 2021).

Public safety and security also require attention. Large gatherings increase the complexity of crowd management, traffic control and emergency response. The resources required to manage pilgrimage activity should therefore be recognised as part of its overall economic and institutional impact rather than treated as external considerations.

A further concern is commercialisation and authenticity. Pilgrimage is fundamentally a religious practice, and increasing commercial activity around sacred spaces can create tensions between livelihood opportunities and spiritual values. Tourism development that prioritises visitor expenditure without protecting religious meaning may undermine the very cultural and spiritual attributes that make the destination significant (Timothy & Olsen 2006, Raj & Griffin 2021).

The sustainability of Moria therefore depends on balancing economic opportunities with infrastructure capacity, environmental protection, public safety and the preservation of spiritual authenticity. These dimensions are essential for determining whether pilgrimage contributes to net and inclusive regional development rather than simply generating high volumes of economic activity.

Governance and Policy Implications

The scale and complexity of pilgrimage require coordinated governance involving religious institutions, local communities, municipalities, tourism authorities, transport operators, businesses and security agencies. Effective coordination is necessary to manage visitor flows, infrastructure, environmental impacts, trading activity and public safety while protecting the religious character of the destination (Olsen 2021).

For Limpopo, sacred travel represents an opportunity to diversify the province's tourism economy and strengthen linkages between pilgrimage activity and local enterprises. However, policy should focus on economic participation and value retention rather than visitor growth alone. Local businesses could be supported through improved access to finance, business development services, market facilities, skills development and opportunities to participate in pilgrimage-related supply chains (Rogerson 2022, Linda 2024).

A major policy constraint remains the limited availability of destination-level evidence. National tourism statistics increasingly identify religious travel as economically significant, but they do not adequately reveal the expenditure, employment, enterprise turnover, leakages or public costs associated specifically with Moria. Establishing a systematic pilgrimage monitoring framework would therefore improve evidence-based planning. Such a framework could track pilgrim numbers, expenditure patterns, local procurement, employment, informal-sector participation, infrastructure use, waste generation and public expenditure.

Governance should also address unequal participation. Without deliberate measures to integrate local enterprises, a significant share of pilgrimage-related expenditure may accrue to external operators. Strengthening local supply chains and community participation could improve the developmental contribution of pilgrimage, while appropriate regulation could prevent overcrowding, unsafe trading conditions and excessive commercialisation.

Overall, sustainable sacred travel requires a balanced governance model that treats pilgrimage simultaneously as a religious practice, a tourism phenomenon and an economic activity. The objective should not be to maximise visitor numbers, but to strengthen locally retained economic benefits while managing environmental, infrastructural, social and cultural costs.

Discussion

The findings indicate that sacred travel is a multidimensional regional economic phenomenon in which religious mobility interacts with transport, trade, accommodation, informal enterprise and household livelihoods. The Moria pilgrimage demonstrates how large visitor flows can create demand across interconnected sectors and potentially stimulate local production, income and enterprise activity. However, the available contemporary evidence does not permit reliable quantification of the magnitude of these effects.

A key finding is that pilgrimage can create opportunities for livelihood diversification and micro-enterprise activity. Food vending, retailing, transport, accommodation and other small-scale activities may provide supplementary income, particularly for households with limited access to formal employment. These opportunities, however, are unlikely to be evenly distributed. Access to finance, trading space, skills, networks and markets can determine which households and enterprises benefit most.

The analysis also highlights the distinction between economic activity and inclusive regional development. Large numbers of pilgrims and substantial expenditure do not necessarily translate into proportional benefits for surrounding communities. External suppliers, larger businesses, seasonal trading and limited local procurement may result in economic leakages. The developmental contribution of Moria therefore depends not only on the amount of expenditure generated, but also on who captures that expenditure and how much is retained within the local economy.

Sacred travel also involves significant costs and trade-offs. Large-scale pilgrimage can place pressure on roads, water and sanitation, waste-management systems, public safety and emergency services. These costs may be borne partly by government and host communities without being reflected in conventional tourism expenditure statistics. Consequently, the regional contribution of pilgrimage cannot be assessed adequately by considering gross economic activity alone.

The findings further reveal a tension between commercial opportunity and spiritual integrity. Pilgrimage creates markets for goods and services, but excessive commercialisation may undermine the religious character of the destination.

Economic development interventions should therefore complement rather than displace the spiritual purpose of Moria.

An important contribution of the study is its identification of a destination-level measurement gap. Although religious tourism is increasingly visible in tourism statistics, available evidence does not adequately establish current expenditure per pilgrim, local business turnover, employment effects, economic leakages, infrastructure costs or the distribution of benefits at Moria. The study therefore deliberately avoids assigning a contemporary monetary value to the pilgrimage.

Overall, sacred travel emerges as a conditional asset for regional development. Its contribution depends on local participation, enterprise capacity, economic linkages, infrastructure, governance and environmental management. Increasing pilgrim numbers alone is unlikely to ensure inclusive development. Greater attention should instead be given to local value creation, expenditure retention, community participation and sustainable destination management.

The Moria case consequently demonstrates the need to shift analytical attention from the number of pilgrims to the economic processes and distributional outcomes generated by their presence. This provides a stronger basis for understanding sacred travel as part of rural and regional development rather than simply as a form of religious tourism.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

The findings have several implications for tourism and regional development policy in Limpopo.

First, sacred travel should be incorporated more explicitly into provincial tourism planning. Moria represents a distinctive form of high-volume domestic mobility and should be considered alongside nature-based, cultural and leisure tourism. Policy attention should, however, focus on improving the local economic value and sustainability of pilgrimage rather than simply increasing visitor numbers.

Second, a destination-specific pilgrimage data system should be developed. Regular data collection should cover pilgrim numbers, origins, length of stay, expenditure, transport use, accommodation, local business activity, employment and informal-sector participation. Such information would allow policymakers to distinguish between overall visitor activity and actual local economic benefits.

Third, policy should strengthen local economic retention. Small businesses and informal enterprises could be supported through entrepreneurship development, appropriate trading facilities, access to finance, skills development and improved market access. Local procurement mechanisms could also encourage larger businesses and pilgrimage-related operators to source goods and services from surrounding communities.

Fourth, pilgrimage planning should integrate infrastructure and environmental management. Water, sanitation, waste management, transport, emergency services and public facilities require adequate planning before major pilgrimage events. Longer-term infrastructure investment should benefit both pilgrims and resident communities.

Fifth, security, traffic and crowd management should form part of an integrated pilgrimage-management system. Effective coordination among religious authorities, municipalities, provincial authorities, transport operators, emergency services and law-enforcement agencies is essential for managing large visitor concentrations safely.

Sixth, development initiatives should protect the religious and cultural integrity of Moria. Commercial activities should be managed in consultation with the ZCC and surrounding communities so that economic development does not transform the sacred destination into a purely commercial tourism space.

Finally, a multi-stakeholder sustainable pilgrimage framework could be established to coordinate the ZCC, government institutions, tourism authorities, municipalities, businesses, transport operators and surrounding communities. The framework could establish priorities for local procurement, enterprise development, infrastructure, environmental management, safety and data collection.

The overarching policy objective should therefore be to move from a visitor-volume approach towards a local-value approach, in which the economic, social, environmental and cultural outcomes of pilgrimage are considered together.

Conclusion

Sacred travel is an important yet under-measured component of Limpopo's tourism and regional economy. The ZCC Easter pilgrimage to Moria generates substantial movements of people and creates demand for transport, food, accommodation, retail and informal economic activities. Historical evidence demonstrates that these activities can generate broader regional economic effects, while contemporary evidence confirms Moria's continuing importance as a major pilgrimage destination.

The central issue identified by this study is not the absence of sacred tourism from tourism activity, but the insufficient disaggregation and systematic measurement of its destination-level economic contribution. Existing evidence demonstrates substantial visitor mobility but does not adequately establish current expenditure, local business turnover, employment, household-income effects, economic leakages or infrastructure costs.

The analysis also demonstrates that pilgrimage should not be regarded exclusively as an economic opportunity. Potential livelihood and enterprise benefits occur alongside congestion, infrastructure pressures, environmental challenges, security requirements, unequal benefit distribution and possible tensions surrounding commercialisation. Sacred travel is therefore best understood as a conditional regional development asset.

Its contribution will depend on the extent to which local communities and enterprises participate in pilgrimage-related economic activity, expenditure is retained within the destination, infrastructure is adequately managed, environmental pressures are controlled and the spiritual character of Moria is protected.

The study consequently shifts attention from how many pilgrims visit Moria to how pilgrimage-generated economic value is created, distributed and retained.

This perspective provides a more appropriate basis for assessing the role of sacred travel in inclusive regional development.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study has an important methodological limitation: it relies on a qualitative narrative review and secondary evidence and therefore does not generate new primary estimates of the contemporary economic contribution of the Moria pilgrimage. The available literature provides useful historical evidence, particularly the Social Accounting Matrix estimates of Saayman et al. (2014), but these cannot substitute for current destination-level data.

The absence of primary data limits the ability to determine average expenditure per pilgrim, total pilgrimage revenue, household income effects, local business turnover, employment creation, economic leakages, infrastructure costs and the distribution of benefits among local and external actors. It also limits assessment of environmental and social costs associated with contemporary pilgrimage activity.

Future research should therefore employ mixed-method or quantitative approaches involving pilgrims, local households, informal traders, formal businesses, transport operators, municipalities and religious authorities. Pilgrim expenditure surveys could estimate spending by category and origin; enterprise surveys could measure turnover and employment; household surveys could assess livelihood effects; and input-output or Social Accounting Matrix techniques could estimate multiplier effects. Environmental and infrastructure assessments could additionally quantify waste, water use, congestion and public-service costs.

Such primary research is necessary to move the discussion from identifying plausible economic pathways to measuring the magnitude, distribution and sustainability of pilgrimage-related development effects. It would also allow future studies to determine whether the economic benefits of Moria are sufficiently large and locally retained to justify its treatment as a regional economic development asset.

Avenues for Future Research

The most immediate research priority is collecting destination-specific primary data on the Moria pilgrimage. Future research should establish pilgrims' origins, length of stay, transport expenditure, accommodation expenditure, food and retail spending and other pilgrimage-related consumption.

Research should also examine the distribution of economic benefits by surveying informal traders, small businesses, accommodation providers, transport operators and households surrounding Moria. This would establish changes in turnover, employment and income during pilgrimage periods and identify which groups benefit most.

A further priority is measuring economic leakages and multiplier effects. Reliable expenditure and supply-chain data could be used to estimate direct, indirect and induced effects and determine how much pilgrimage expenditure is retained within Limpopo.

Future research should also measure the infrastructure and environmental costs associated with large-scale pilgrimage, including waste generation, water and sanitation requirements, traffic congestion, emergency services and public-sector expenditure. Combining these costs with economic benefits would provide a more comprehensive assessment of the pilgrimage's regional contribution.

The social and cultural dimensions require equal attention. Research involving pilgrims, residents and religious authorities could examine perceptions of commercialisation, authenticity, community participation and the changing relationship between sacred practice and tourism.

Finally, longitudinal research would help determine whether pilgrimage generates sustained development or primarily short-term seasonal economic activity. Comparing pilgrimage and non-pilgrimage periods over several years could reveal whether pilgrimage contributes to lasting changes in household income, enterprise development, employment and local investment.

Future research should therefore move beyond documenting the scale of religious mobility towards systematically measuring its economic, social, environmental and distributional consequences. This would provide the empirical evidence required to determine whether Moria can function as a genuinely inclusive and sustainable regional development asset.

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