



Re-establishing the Angle

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The Bible that sits on my shelf today is the same book I received with a touch of reverence as a ten-year-old graduate into the young adult's class of my Pennsylvania Quaker meeting. Its spine is staid black leather and its pages are tissue-thin - too delicate, I remember thinking proudly, to be groped by my formerly reckless hands. Between those pages were several otherworldly photographs that I examined carefully. They were my first "imprints" of a Holy Land that would, many years later, take on the multiple dimensions of real life.

But it was only after attending the conference held by the Center for Jerusalem Studies, *Capturing 19th Century Jerusalem in Photography*, that those images came flooding back. Pulling the 1972 edition of the Revised Standard Version of the Holy Bible



According to Bible publisher Nelson, this aged photo of Al Aqsa portrays the "Mosque of Omar, site of Israel's Temple."

from my bookcase, I turned to its illustrated pages filled with photos of *terra sancta* depicted the way publisher Thomas Nelson wished to portray it. The photos have no credits and a tinted quality, as if much older than the publication date itself.

There is the town of Nablus. "Mount Gerezim, Ancient Shechem, and Mt. Ebal," reads the caption over a photo of an unfamiliarly unpeopled valley. "Israelites carried the ark of the covenant through here," it reads. There is no mention of Palestinians or Palestinian place names, the local soap industry or even the Samaritan community that continues to worship at Mount Gerezim.

Of the handful of pictured sites, only Hebron is populated, here by the tiny figures of robed women on a brown backdrop of stone and dust. The place where we are told "Abraham and Isaac lived" looked to me, as a child, as the ancient and unchanged stomping ground of these mystical figures.

Only somehow, the technology of the camera had been transported back centuries to capture bible times. The use of the camera offered authenticity: here was a place I could visit in life that had the enticing and yearned-for quality of blessedness. The photos' use in a Bible made them God's honest truth.

These images had "intimations of Jesus himself," as Ruth Hummel describes western

photographs of Palestine taken during the Ottoman period.¹ Publisher Thomas Nelson, I observed, was only continuing a long tradition of using photography to place Palestine in a continuum of timelessness, where the viewer was treated to a vision of holy land that simply recreated what he or she already believed to be true.

Photography first began to capture Palestine in the mid-nineteenth century, when the Middle East became the focus of intense photographic interest. Through the Hudson School Tour, Americans paid five cents to look at photos of the Holy Land that for the most part depicted a "vast, desolate, underpopulated land."² A fashionable method of showing the photos was via stereoscope, where the viewer looked at three-dimensional images through a hole in a box, thus magnifying and realizing the experience of being transported to *terra sancta*. Later in the century, the creation of the half tone made it possible for these photographs to be mass-produced in books, glutting the market with objectified images of Palestine and Jerusalem.

Photographs of Palestine were specific in this regard, said Issam Nassar, associate editor of the *Jerusalem Quarterly File* (see "In Their Image" in this issue). Westerners in Cairo focused on the bawdry, teeming life of a city. But when they arrived in Jerusalem, a reverence took over and pains were taken to recreate the biblical representation that authors and artists had stitched together from the Bible itself, earlier travelers and previously-viewed photos.

These Western exports contradicted the reality of Jerusalem, a Muslim Ottoman city, full of rich class differences and political strife. Jerusalem's first studio was opened in 1880, and its arrival heralded a new modernity; photography predated the introduction of automobiles and telephones.³ Most local photographers initially reproduced



A Palestinian Bedouin offers her best side for a portrait somewhere near 1910. Source: Library of Congress.



A 1900s road sign reads in English, French, Arabic and Hebrew: "Speed of motor driven vehicles through Jerusalem not to exceed eight miles and hour." Source: Library of Congress.

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the landscapes that sold so well in the Western market, before moving on to portraiture. Nassar noted that Palestinian aristocracy duplicated the conventions of this European invention. A 1911 photo portrait of Alfred Roch is a classic example of a Renaissance painting, with the man of the house positioned slightly above and to the right of the woman, in an indication of the dominant patriarchy.

Photography was also used by the rural classes, whose men might have had a portrait taken before heading off to fight in World War I - a precautionary measure in case of early demise. For a brief period, the postmortem photo emerged locally. Families were pictured dressed as if for celebration as they propped up the recently deceased in a memento shot.⁴

One of the major contemporary contributions to the desanctification of Ottoman Palestine through the eye of the lens is a French collection of 20,000 glass negatives that have for the most part remained unshown.⁵ The Ecole Biblique collection spans the years of 1890 to 1935 and is on a tour of Jerusalem, Ramallah, Nablus and Hebron before making its way to international galleries.

Immediately, the subject matter of the 17 photos shown at the Jerusalem conference stood in stark contrast to the reproductions of the Hudson School, Thomas Nelson and other mass marketers of Holy Land images. In one black-and-white photo taken in Jerusalem's Old City, a seemingly indigent man slumps against an arch, his small body swallowed by the sweeping line of architecture. Another portrays a Jerusalem square filled with Ottoman banners and festive garb.

These images speak more truthfully to the immense political upheaval of Jerusalem in the nineteenth century. The taking of Syria by Ibrahim Pasha and the subsequent Tanzimat reforms during Ottoman rule have no place in the imagery of the forced biblical landscape.



A Jerusalem man tends his pots in 1880s Ottoman Jerusalem. Source: Library of Congress.

It was in this century, too, that while the number of inhabitants in Jerusalem increased eight-fold, the Jewish population in the city grew by twenty times its original size.⁶

Why then did the majority of Western viewers seek only a contrary depiction of Palestine as solely a religious subject? The result was to maintain Palestine in a mythic realm, as a place where miracle unfolded and where the future held miracles yet to come. Indeed, this Western (and colonial) imagery perpetuated (and perpetuates) a timeless and repeating creation story. It was not that Western visitors ignored the rising tensions between growing numbers of Jewish settlers and Palestinians, it was that presenting Palestine as frozen in time facilitated what was seen as a new biblical triumph: the rise of Israel. Perhaps Nelson explains it best himself.

"Biblical Palestine was a wild land," Nelson tells us in a description prefacing his gospel. "Outside the tiny villages gangs of robbers prowled in search of plunder." That is, until the modern state of Israel puts right the chaos. "Greater changes have been introduced in the past few decades than in all the preceding thousands of years. The cities

of modern Israel look much like any American city; but until this century the little Arab villages were scarcely changed from those of Bible times."

Nelson's description encapsulated the efficacy of these photos. On the one hand, they made Palestine desirable, immortal and understandable to outsiders. On the other, they made it easily improved upon by ready Westerners.

From the back row of chairs at the Jerusalem Center conference, the image filling the camera viewfinder was of a different Jerusalem: the elegant, educated class reinstating Palestine as itself. "Photographs never lie," said historian George Hintlian as he exhorted his listeners to collect and preserve the city's Palestinian photographic heritage.⁷ It would have been an artist's decision whether or not to include in this particular photograph the neighborhood boys raucously flying a kite over the heads of the audience, or to set the camera to capture only the evening sun reflected on the row of scholars' brows. But the depiction, even as it encompassed the classic backdrop of Jerusalem's stones, was different from those etched in me as a child - here, Palestinians themselves were establishing the angle.

Endnotes

¹ Ruth Hummel, "Biblicizing Jerusalem." While specific ideas presented here have been sourced to their authors, presenters at the Jerusalem conference, the main thrust of this essay is also credited to their work.

² Ibid.

³ Issam Nassar, "Early Palestinian Photography Between Local and Western Influences."

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Jean Michel de Tarragon, "Photographic Workshop of the Ecole Biblique."

⁶ Yusef Al Natsheh, "Historical and Architectural Transformations in 19th Century Jerusalem."

⁷ George Hintlian, "Essayi Garabedian & the Armenian Workshops."