‘Biblification’ in the Service of Colonialism
Jerusalem in Nineteenth-century Photography
Issam Nassar

Nineteenth-century Jerusalem was a city in great transition. It underwent political and administrative reform inspired mainly by the Tanzimat reforms of the Ottoman Sultanate between 1839 and 1876. The arrival of European missionaries, consulates and colonists also ushered it into a new era of European policies towards the city. Similarly, the expansion of the city outside its historical walls and the building of the railway station transformed social and economic life in Jerusalem in unprecedented ways. Jerusalem became the administrative seat of a district that carried its name, its population growing at a rate faster than ever before and its markets flourishing with all kinds of tourist paraphernalia as well as products from Europe and its own hinterlands. These were times of social and political transformations, of modernisation and rising interconnectedness with the rest of the world. Yet, to its European visitors, Jerusalem seemed to embody a world of the past. Unimpressed by its social and economic growth, European visitors often lamented the fact that it could be reached by train. D L Miller, who arrived in Palestine for his second visit shortly after the completion of the Jaffa–Jerusalem railway, expressed his irritation at the idea of reaching Jerusalem by train:

From Jaffa to Jerusalem by railway robs this most interesting journey of much of its old-time sentiment and brings it down to the common place of every-day life. The first feeling that comes to us as we stand on the platform at the depot in Jaffa and hear the bell ring and voice of the conductor shouting, ‘All aboard for Jerusalem,’ is that a great sacrilege has been committed in the very fact of building a railroad in the Holy Land.¹

Nineteenth-century European photography had a similar attitude towards Jerusalem, representing the city as an ancient place that belonged more to the world of the Bible than to this world. In doing so, it failed to document Jerusalem as a living and socially inhabited place.

¹ D L Miller, Wanderings in Bible Lands, The Brethren’s Publishing Company, Mount Morris, 1894, p 490
In what follows, I will illustrate the ways in which Jerusalem was presented in early photography and reflect on the ramifications of such representations, or the lack thereof.

**INVENTING PHOTOGRAPHY, CONSTRUCTING CONSCIOUSNESS**

The invention of the fixed photographic image in the nineteenth century made it possible to preserve the past mechanically in a way that human memory was unable to do. Photography brought 'the past into the present more than ever before, changing the way people experienced their personal past and the collective past of history'\(^2\). This 'mirror with memory'\(^3\) provided a sense of the continuous existence of the past. It enabled the viewer for the first time to see images of people and places in faraway lands whose existence had previously belonged, for the most part, to the realm of imagination.

But the assumption that photography renders its subject exactly as it exists remains highly questionable. Not only do photographers manipulate reality through the use of special settings, effects, techniques, lighting and positions, but the photograph itself acquires various meanings depending on the viewer's previous knowledge of its subject and his/her reaction to it. The photograph – which originates as a product of a special relationship between the photographer and his/her subject – is transformed by virtue of a special relation between the subject and the viewer. These relationships incorporate not only aesthetic considerations but ideological ones as well. In this sense, the photograph is a tool of power and authority by which both the photographer and the viewer through their gaze conquer the world of the subject and assign meanings to it.

Photographs must be regarded as visual documents that cannot be separated from the historical conditions in which they are produced and in which they are viewed. Sarah Graham-Brown suggests a number of elements that should be taken into consideration when studying photographs, namely the context in which the photograph is taken; the relationships of power and authority between photographer and subject; the aesthetic and ideological considerations that affect the photographer's choice of subject; and the way the photograph might be interpreted by its viewers in a particular historical period.\(^4\) Nineteenth-century photographs of Jerusalem will then be viewed in this context. As historical documents they reflect not only the way the city appeared at the time but, more importantly, various attitudes and conceptions prevalent in the European imagination. But this is not a one way process for, at the same time, the photographs themselves have the power to shape and reshape the very same imagination they reflect. In the words of Susan Sontag, 'photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe'.\(^5\)

**BIBLIFYING JERUSALEM IN EARLY PHOTOGRAPHS**

Nineteenth-century photographic interest in Jerusalem was very much linked to a complex web of European connections to the Near East at
large, particularly of a colonial and scientific interest in the region but also a romantic passion for imaginary exotic sites and a revived Christian interest in biblical studies. With the possible exception of the crusading period (1099–1189), many more Europeans visited Jerusalem in the nineteenth century than at any other previous time in history. Prominent writers, politicians, pilgrims, tourists and photographers arrived in Jerusalem to see for themselves, as one such visitor put it:

... places mentioned in the Bible, to study ancient customs which still remain, and if possible to understand the significance of many sentences in the Scripture which were very obscure to me and to those who tried to teach me...[7]

Such a desire to ‘see for oneself’ did not always translate into a journey to Palestine. For it was now possible to engage in the act of seeing without ever leaving home. Professional photographers were enabling viewers around the world to ‘see for themselves’ and were taking the trouble to travel to places far and near to supply images that were in high demand in the large market which print-technology had already made possible a few centuries before. Not only were pictures of Jerusalem exhibited alongside photographs of the great European cities, but they also appeared in travel books, Bibles and Sunday school books all around Europe and North America. In most such photographs the city as a site is connected with biblical history, indicating that there was a tradition of uniformity in context, subject, aesthetics and textual commentary. The main churches – or holy sites – of Jerusalem, such as the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the Church of the Ascension, the Ecce Homo Arch and the Garden of Gethsemane, were among the most popular sites to be photographed. Other locations – not necessarily marked by a church but known to have some biblical association – also appeared frequently in the photographs. The village of El-A’zariye (referred to in the pictures as Bethany), the Valley of the Kings and the Mount of Olives are typical examples. It is particularly significant that the captions for such photographs – as in the case of El-A’zariye – almost always gave the biblical names rather than those used by the people of Palestine at the time. The most striking example of this is the continuous reference to the mosque of the Dome of the Rock – a marvellous architectonic Islamic shrine – as The Site of Solomon’s Temple. This persistent ignoring of the existence of the mosque went even further in some cases. On his 1854 photograph of the Dome of the Rock, the Scottish photographer James Graham printed Luke 21:37 on the negative. [8] The verse states that ‘in the day time He was teaching in the Temple and at night in the mount called the Mount of Olives’. It is ironic that European photographers were able to see what had existed two thousand years before on that site and ignore what was there before their own eyes; perhaps such ‘blindness’ simply resulted from the market demand in Europe for Holy Land photographs since they were often used to illustrate Bibles, pilgrims’ narratives and other religious books, following the tradition already set by painters and engravers.

It is hard to find any human figures in the early photographic images of Palestine, particularly those dating from before 1867. The work of great photographers such as Maxime Du Camp (1849), Auguste Salzmann (1850s), Robertson and Beato (1850s) and Francis Frith (1860s) illustrates

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[6] Space will not allow us to consider these connections in this essay.


this point. It was not until the late 1860s that human figures started to appear more frequently; but only a few of Henry Phillips’s photographs depicted people, even when he had been sent to Palestine with the specific purpose of documenting the country. Even in the Holy Land photographs of Bonfils (late 1860s, 1870s and 1890s) – famous for their staged studio portraits – human figures were absent. We note in particular the complete absence of people at the Dome of the Rock. Many other important locations, such as the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the streets of Jerusalem, the Damascus Gate and the Wailing Wall often appeared either empty or with a handful of people fully subordinated to the landscape. These images provoke in the viewer the feeling that Jerusalem was an empty place, for some of the liveliest places in the town were reduced to sites of ancient uninhabited ruins.

9 Phillips accompanied the Palestine Exploration Fund’s archaeological mission to Palestine in 1867. He has been mentioned often as the first photographer to take ethnographic photographs in Palestine.

A photograph of an empty street of Jerusalem, photo by the American colony circa early 1900s.
The caption that accompanied this photograph is: The Temple area, Jerusalem, Tower of Antonia. (Site of the Roman castle). This is not a picture of the Tower of Antonia but the minarets of the Aqsa mosque. One of the American colony photographers thought he saw what was there two thousand years before and failed to see what was in front of his eyes. Early 1900s

There are some exceptions, for instance with photographs taken of the front of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre during the busy season of Easter in which large crowds could be seen. But where captions were used, they seemed to have had the effect of downplaying the significance of the people present in these pictures. A good example is Dwight Elmendorf’s 1901 photograph of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre on Easter Day in which we see crowds attempting to enter the doors of the church. Its caption, The Throng of Pilgrims and Others, by describing most of the people in
the photograph as pilgrims emphasises the authenticity of the location as a holy site and reduces the local population in the city to mere 'others'.

Although there was hostility towards the intruding European photographers and their intimidating cameras, which violated religious codes sacred to both Muslims and Jews, this was not the real reason for the absence of Palestinian people from the photographs. They were absent, at some level, from the mind and consciousness of the European, which reduced the city to a location that could attest to the truth of the biblical story rather than a real place in this world. The American photographer Edward I. Wilson, who photographed Palestine in the 1880s, corroborates this point in a striking way. In an article that appeared in Century Magazine, Wilson stated that the peasants he encountered near the Sea of Galilee were 'repulsive', adding that 'they are entirely out of harmony with the character of the Land'. But in fact even the photographers who, unlike Wilson, were favourably impressed by the people of Palestine avoided including them in their photographs. The Scottish photographer John Cramb wrote of his disappointment at not being able to photograph the women of Bethlehem whom he thought were beautiful. Reporting on his 1860 journey to Palestine, he wrote:

> The women of Bethlehm are generally fair and always beautiful. Every traveler remarks that... Sincerely did I regret the arrangement that denied me the pleasure of bringing home witnesses to the correctness of my judgment. But I was not expected to spend my time on such subjects, though I now think it a pity that I was so scrupulous in the discharge of my duty.

It would appear that photographers like Cramb thought that their buyers would resent having photographs of important sites being desecrated by

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12 John Cramb, 'Palestine in 1860; Or, A Photographer's Journal of a Visit to Jerusalem', *British Journal of Photography*, no X, 1 November 1861, p 388
A carpenter photographed in Nazareth on 10 February 1904 by William Herman Rau brings to mind Joseph of the Gospels.

the inclusion of Arabs, Turks and Jews. This 'amazing ability to discover the land without discovering the people,' to use the words of Beshara Doumani, may very well have paved the way for the emergence of the popular mythical image of Palestine as a land without a people, which became a slogan of the Zionist movement half a century later.

Images of shepherds in the vast arid mountain landscape or of a few fishermen at the Sea of Galilee were among the most popular photographs. But such images of shepherds invoked the biblical story of the birth of Jesus; a woman drawing water from a well speaks of Jesus with the Samaritan woman; and women at the entrance of a cave recall the scene of resurrection. Some photographers went even further to inscribe the backs of their photographs with particular biblical verses relevant to
the depicted image. Another example in this respect is the photograph taken by Bonfils in the 1870s of an old peasant man talking to an old peasant woman in a field of wheat. The caption describes the scene as *The field of Boaz*. Elmendorf, who copied this scene, even names the couple *Ruth and Boaz*.

In a stereoscope from the Keystone View Company, we see the plateau between al-Aqsa mosque and the Dome of the Rock filled with people, its caption describing the scene as ‘Mohammedan Pilgrims in Temple Area, Jerusalem’. However, if we examine the back of the card, we get a better idea why Muslim pilgrims were photographed in the first place. Among other things, the text on the back states:

> This is a Mohammedan festival; but it may illustrate many events in Bible history. When, a little less than a thousand years before Christ, on that plateau arose the walls and pinnacles of Solomon’s newly built temple, walked up those steps with songs and trumpets and harps, King Solomon, in royal robes and crown, leading the procession. When two centuries after Solomon, King Hezekiah held a great passover and people came from all parts of the land, there was a congregation like this before us.

Not only did the immediate reality of ‘Mohammedan Pilgrims’ serve to illustrate only certain past biblical events, but the information was also historically inaccurate. The text states that the Dome of the Rock was built in the tenth century after Christ when in fact it dates back to the end of the seventh century.

The process of turning Palestinian peasants into biblical icons also had its counterpart in the genre of staged studio portraits, which became fashionable in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. The work of Tancrède R. Dumas – employed in the late 1870s by the American Palestine Exploration Society – exemplifies this photographic genre. He photographed people, especially women, dressed in the different Palestinian traditional costumes. In his written identifications his subjects were associated with towns and villages that had biblical connotations such as Bethlehem or Nazareth. However, it is hard to credit the authenticity of some of these featured characters because a number of his subjects appear to have been posed models. Proof of this can be found in the Bonfils collection where the same person appears in two different photographs, identified in one as a cotton carder and in the other as the Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem.16 Similarly, in one photograph by Tancrède Dumas in the 1880s, the posing subject is identified as the ‘Maronite patriarch of Jerusalem’, an office that never existed. Moreover, such photographs featured members of the smallest minorities in Palestine, such as the Samaritans, Armenians and Bedouins, who were not representative of the country’s population.

It is sometimes difficult to determine whether some of the photographs were staged or were simply realistic scenes that the photographers’ manipulations transformed into some sort of biblical allegorical image. In a stereoscopic card from the collection entitled *The Travel Lessons of Jesus*,17 we see a man dressed as an Armenian monk walking away from another man lying on the ground, while a third person dressed in a Palestinian peasant dress, having stepped down from his horse, helps the man on the ground. The caption reads *On The Road to Jericho: The Parable of the Good Samaritan*. The Road to Jericho is representative of


17 This collection was designed and its text authored by Reverend William Byron Forbush and distributed by Underwood & Underwood publishers in the 1890s.
a large number of works that were staged to reflect biblical scenes; among them, a large number of photographs show people with deformities, most notably lepers, who invoke the biblical story of Jesus healing the lepers. The caption, "Unclean Wretched Lepers Outside Jerusalem," appeared on the back of all such stereoscopes from Underwood & Underwood. The accompanying guide to the collection Jerusalem Through the Stereoscope notes that ‘there are generally forty to fifty of them outside the city’, adding that such a deadly ‘disease of sin’ is hereditary for ‘every man inherits [it] from a line of sinning ancestors... which no human power can cure’.  

This staging of biblical scenes was not limited to nineteenth-century photography images but continued throughout the British Mandate period (1917–48). In Judean Home, a photograph by the Swede Eric Matson taken in either the 1920s or the 1930s, the exterior of a very old construction resembling a grotto can be seen. A father figure stands before the structure, while a mother figure, holding a baby in her arms, sits on the ground. Another man and two camels can also be seen in this photographic re-creation of the Nativity scene.

It is almost impossible, however, to find any nineteenth-century photographs of Jerusalem that corresponded to Orientalist art of the period, as illustrated by Gérome’s The Snake Charmer. If the image of the East as the ‘exotic other’ was as popular as travelogues, romantic poetry and paintings indicated at the turn of the twentieth century, why was this absent from photographs of Jerusalem? It was in fact fashionable for many, including some of those who visited Jerusalem, to take photographs of nude women in other places (often identified as Algerian, Nubian, Moorish or Bedouin), but not in Jerusalem. While this may suggest a desire on the part of the photographers to respect the sanctity of the city of Jesus, its religious ceremonies and clergy, this may also indicate that European photographers did not view Jerusalem as part of the Orient, but as a familiar site of European consciousness.

Several photographs taken by Bonfils and by those of the American Colony (among others) show the same scene labelled First View of Jerusalem, and a similar number of animals and people in the same spots. What we have is more than a simple case of new photographers following the lead of earlier ones. A photographic tradition had been established in the minds of the photographers, which they felt obliged to follow. It was as if any site previously photographed in the city had acquired some meaning that every new photographer felt a need to document.

The point needs to be reiterated that there is ‘no such thing as one, definitive meaning of a text or image’, for meaning depends very much on the particular experiences of the readers and viewers and the historical and cultural contexts in which it is placed. It is also important to emphasise that photographers are not always fully aware of all the possible meanings of the images they produce, but are subject to various kinds of unconscious processes through which connections with previously existing concepts and ideas are formulated. The market demand for certain kinds of images of Jerusalem, their publication and exhibition, confirm that an authoritative view of Jerusalem was in existence both in Europe and in America. Nineteenth-century photographs of Palestine were not only about representing the country’s landscape; they also revealed something very significant about the way in which Europeans thought of
themselves and of the world around them at that particular time in history.

For the European powers – the British and French in particular – the nineteenth century was a century of discovery during which they extended their economic, political and cultural hegemony over most of the non industrialised world. In the case of Palestine, this paradigm of European colonial expansionism was further complicated by the special connection of the country to the biblical history of both Christianity and Judaism and was fully exploited to serve European colonial expansionism. Calls for a ‘Peaceful Crusade’ to establish a European Christian enclave in the Holy Land were heard in Europe after the Egyptian conquest in the 1830s. In this context, the different European powers competed to proclaim themselves the protectors of the different Christian communities in Palestine, a role that further enabled them to expand their presence in the city. Russia pronounced itself the protector of the Christian Orthodox community; France assumed the same role for the newly re-established Latin Church; and Britain – given the fact that there was no Anglican congregation – chose to present itself as the protector of the Jewish community.

Photography presented Palestine as a biblical site most relevant to Europe. It highlighted the presence of minorities (Christian or Jewish) who might need protection and who had close ties to Europe; and it presented the rest of the inhabitants as a mass of backward and uncivilised individuals. The images that invaded European and American homes contributed to the shaping in the European mind of an image of Palestine as a dream land, or to use Doumani’s words, ‘waiting to be reclaimed both spiritually and physically’.

24 Doumani, ‘Rediscovering Ottoman Palestine’, op cit, p 7

25 ibid