

A Western medium

The Bible and the Image: The History of Photography in the Holy Land, 1839–1899 by Yeshayahu Nir. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985. xx + 294 pages. \$39.95 (hard).

Nineteenth-century photography of the Near East has received much attention in recent years. Surveys such as *Travellers in Ancient Lands: A Portrait of the Middle East, 1839–1919* by Louis Vaczek and Gail Buckland (1981) have made a wealth of pictures readily available, while monographic studies such as that by François Heilbrun about Auguste Salzmann in *Felicien de Saulcy (1807–1880) et la Terre Sainte* (1982) have recreated the historical context. In the twentieth century, perhaps no less than in the nineteenth, contemporary concerns have made the pictures seem of vital interest. Whereas once religious questions seemed paramount, political concerns now dominate. Representations of all kinds, but especially photographs, provide crucial evidence about the area and its population as well as of Western attitudes toward them. Of course, the same descriptions—of the desolation of the land, for example—can be made to serve a variety of views; on this subject, as on any other, photographs hold no privileged position as document.

Nir's book makes an important contribution to photographic history. First, it incorporates much new historical material, some of it from unfamiliar Israeli collections and publications. For sheer factual accounting of the photographers who worked in the Holy Land, *The Bible and the Image* sets a new standard. Early figures, such as the daguerreotypists George Keith and Girault de Prangey, receive full treatment, with careful attention paid to their purposes and backgrounds. Now-famous photographers, such as Auguste Salzmann and Francis Frith, appear in a much richer historical setting than is customary. Particularly wel-

come is Nir's effort to locate individual photographers within the context of their original presentation. Thus, he discusses Salzman's *Jerusalem* as a whole book, rather than isolating individual photographs that seem to us most remarkable. This approach allows him to characterize Salzman's interests as those of a Christian pilgrim as well as an archaeologist and his organizational method as sequential. The photographs that today seem so radical compositionally most often conclude a series that moves from the general to the specific. Frith, by contrast, reflected the varied interests of the armchair traveler. Unlike James Robertson and Felix Beato or Francis Bedford, for example, he mixed contemporary scenes with pictures of more obvious topographical and historical interest. The monumental grandeur so often found in their work does not appear in Frith's photographs.

In his attempt to establish the historical context, Nir properly devotes considerable attention to the pictorial differences created by different points of view. As Mark Twain remarked in *Innocents Abroad*, religion provided considerable motivation:

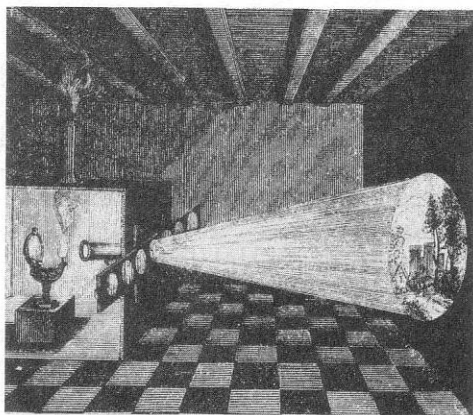
Presbyterians . . . came seeking evidence in support of their particular creed; they found a Presbyterian Palestine, and they had already made up their minds to find no other, though possibly they did not know it, being blinded by their zeal. Others were Baptists, seeking Baptist evidence and a Baptist Palestine. Others were Catholics, Methodists, Episcopalians. . . .

Distinctions appear both in subject matter and in composition. Quickly summarized, Nir's research suggests that the French tended to emphasize the actual monuments, many of which played a role in Catholic practice and dogma. The British, by contrast, showed a more typically Prot-

estant interest in the landscape of the Bible. Of course, archaeologists and topographers had different interests again.

Nir's most challenging thesis takes its premise from Edward Said's *Orientalism*. Like the scholarly productions examined by Said, the photographs document—he argues—only an intrusive and fundamentally fictive vision of the land and its inhabitants. Even when not explicitly connected to a political program, these Western works serve Western ends of domination. Thus, photography began and remained a Western medium, a tool of paternalistic and colonistic interests. Nir substantiates this claim by studying the attitudes of the Western photographers as well as those of the inhabitants of the land. In a particularly interesting chapter, he examines the religious prohibitions against visual imagery in both Islam and Judaism as the possible basis for local hostility toward the medium. He concludes, however, that a more powerful cause arose from the deep-seated reluctance of a pre-industrial society to accept a mechanical medium. Even when members of the local population took up photography as a profession at the end of the century, they tended to be outsiders such as Armenians, and they directed their business to Westerners. Neither Arab nor Jewish communities had use for pictorial records of the land or their faces. Both relied upon oral traditions for their personal as well as religious histories. Furthermore, the poverty of much of the region prohibited such expenditures.

Nir's use of Said's thesis seems important and convincing. It is specific in its application to the particular historical situation and relatively undogmatic—at least after the rather polemical introduction. In an odd way, though, the very degree to which it is convincing undercuts his argument. Having demonstrated that photography remained a Western medium for the whole of the century, Nir cannot claim that



“no relevant conceptual framework” exists for the history of Middle Eastern photography (p. xviii). After all, if the pictures are as thoroughly Western as contemporary views of the British countryside, why should they demand a different treatment? Only if one supposes that an objective reality exists—which these representations distort—do the pictures pose problems. If, on the other hand, one assumes that any representation describes a point of view, then Nir’s criticism creates a dilemma: if all observers inevitably reflect their position, then what can Western photographers (or historians) do except express Western concepts? Nir sometimes accepts the idea of an objective reality (e.g., p. 21: “[Photography] distorted reality to suit its imaginary mold”), while at other times he seems to accept the possibility that various points of view can be simultaneously valid. Once the limitation of the viewer’s vantage point has been conceded, the evidence may be of interest for various arguments.

A second problem with *The Bible and the Image* seems to me more damaging: Nir analyzes the photographs as if they existed in a vacuum. Despite a few nods to images in other media, such as the lithographs of David Roberts, there is no sustained attempt to examine the photographs in terms of previous pictorial traditions.

Sometimes the results are startling. For example, Nir suggests that de Prangey’s tendency to photograph architectural details as close-ups resulted from his experience with casting (p. 41). Yet, in fact, the compositions reflect long-established traditions of architectural documentation. More important, this disregard of established topographical conventions makes Nir overlook one of the most interesting problems faced by the photographers of Jerusalem. Alone among the great cities of antiquity, Jerusalem lacked tangible evidence of the historical past prized by Western travelers. Unlike Rome, Athens, and Cairo, the city offered an experience of place rather than a collection of recognizable, artistically satisfying monuments. Traditionally, painters and printmakers had solved the problem of what to show by representing the events themselves. The attention of their audience did not center on the location so much as on the aura created by the belief in the events that had happened there; the religious experience differed qualitatively from that of the student of antiquity.

These rich pictorial traditions offered little to the photographer, who could not escape the limited visual rewards of the actual remains. Much-venerated subjects appeared as nothing when seen by the camera, and others had uncertain relevance to the viewer accustomed to reconstructions. Furthermore, the modern city held no compensatory interest for these travelers. Even the resourceful Francis Frith apologized for the monotony (to his eyes) of his panorama of Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives:

It cannot be expected that after nineteen sieges, and several complete demolitions, there are many very conspicuous objects of antiquarian interest in Jerusalem. But the Christian traveller has still the delightful satisfaction of recognizing, beyond doubt, many of the

sites of events. . . . You would never tire of sitting under the shade of one of these old olive trees in the month of April, dreamily inhaling the very atmosphere of sacred history.

Most photographers did the best they could—like Frith, they recorded the sites of biblical events as well as actual monuments. A few, however, attempted to describe “the very atmosphere of sacred history.” One of the most brilliant efforts was made by Louis de Clercq in his photographs of the Stations of the Cross. As Nir points out (p. 60), de Clercq was the only photographer of the mid-nineteenth century who attempted to describe the whole of the greatest pilgrimage path of Christianity. A look at his photographs reveals why: the Via Dolorosa offered nothing to see. Through brilliant manipulation of the grainy softness of the paper negative, de Clercq managed to evoke a sense of the spiritual experience. Like other French photographers of the 1850s, he exploited the medium to produce suggestive and mysterious effects of light, shadow, and texture.

Perhaps the treatment of photography in isolation is inevitable at this (still early) stage in the study of its history. One might argue, too, that historians of nineteenth-century painting have not been more adventurous. Much of the most interesting art historical work of the past twenty years has been devoted to the reintegration of the established masters and masterpieces into their historical context. Perhaps, like tunnel diggers, we each can labor only on a single path. Although we take up where others have left off, we meet others only after long and solitary efforts. Nir should be congratulated on his labors; it is the task of others to extend his work in new directions.

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