

The book is addressed mostly to scholars of medieval culture and a casual reader may, perhaps, feel alienated by the complicated abbreviations and Latin terms frequently used by authors. The book is not esoteric, however,

and it discusses the visual evidence from the point of view of art and social history, literary theories, and semantics. As such, it can be useful to anyone interested in cultural studies.

## John Davis, *The Landscape of Belief: Encountering the Holy Land in Nineteenth-Century American Art and Culture*

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Davis, John. *The Landscape of Belief: Encountering the Holy Land in Nineteenth-Century American Art and Culture*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996. 264 pp., 100 illus. + 7 plates. Cloth, US\$65, ISBN 0-601-04373-6.

Americans have always (or at least until very recently) seen their country in theological or quasi-theological terms. The New World has been understood by Protestants as the new Eden, for example, or the new Promised Land. This is reflected not only in the geographical allusions of place names, of course, but also in the historical and eschatological perspectives that have influenced everything from patterns of internal migration to foreign policy. It is a matter of national identity. America has a mission in the world. Or, as John Winthrop put it en route to the Massachusetts Bay colony, colonists had undertaken a divinely ordained "errand into the wilderness."

The mission of these new Israelites has always been to complete what those of old had failed to complete: bringing about the Second Coming, the Messianic Age, the Millennium, the Rapture...or, in the language of recent times, the secular utopia made possible by industrial technology and participatory democracy. Given the centrality of biblical paradigms in America's identity, even when veiled by secular terminology, it is hardly surprising that American artists applied these paradigms directly to the landscapes of both the United States itself and the Holy Land.

In *The Landscape of Belief*, John Davis discusses the latter (though not, unfortunately, the former). Several American landscape painters and photographers worked in Ottoman Palestine during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He mentions archaeologists, evangelists, and tourists as well — mainly because those in the former categories were so

often in one or more of the latter ones as well. Their aim, observes Davis, was to present Palestine as the prototypical, even archetypal, American landscape (which sometimes implied, he argues, a landscape that Americans could not only revere but possibly rule or own as well). These are his main topics in the first two chapters of Part I: "The American Identification with the Holy Land" and "The American Presence in the Holy Land."

In the next two chapters, Davis discusses the technologies used by these artists. In "Panoramic Imagery in the Early Nineteenth Century," he refers to the construction of either buildings in which viewers were surrounded by a circular biblical landscape or "frames" within which the landscape would be unrolled for viewers at special exhibitions. In "Landscape, Photography, and Spectacle in the Late Nineteenth Century," Davis discusses stereoscopes, dioramas (scale models), and even what we would now call biblical "theme parks." Among these was Palestine Park, the most popular exhibit at the St Louis world's fair of 1904. Davis might have pointed out, however, that the vicarious experience visitors sought was nothing new for Christians. The ground plan of Byzantine churches, for example, had allowed even early medieval worshippers to "tour" the Holy Land (the altar representing the Holy Sepulchre, the narthex Bethlehem, and so on).

The same, in a slightly different way, has been true of Catholic churches (which allow "pilgrims" to wend their way along the "Via Dolorosa" as they pass shrines representing fourteen stations of the cross). In fact, according to Mircea Eliade and many others, the same thing is true of sacred places in almost every religious tradition: wherever they happen to be located, pilgrimage sites (temples, churches, synagogues, shrines, festival grounds, tombs of holy people, or whatever) allow worshippers to re-experience sacred events (those associated

with creation, say, or the founding heroes) on a microcosmic level. If there was anything "new" about Palestine Park, it was merely the thinly veiled acknowledgment that American Protestants, too, longed for something long associated with the despised Catholics.

The four chapters of Part II are of interest mainly to those interested in art history and religious studies. They focus in on the biographical backgrounds, psychological idiosyncrasies, and stylistic preferences of specific artists: "Miner Kellogg, Mount Sinai, and the New Jerusalem Church;" "Edward Troye's Holy Land Series: The Flow of Sacred Waters;" "James Fairman: The View from Outside;" and "Frederic Church's Late Career: The Landscape of History." Of these, the most familiar is the latter (a pupil of Thomas Cole and final luminary of the Hudson River School of landscape painting).

Some of these artists saw themselves almost as scientists: presenting visual catalogues, as it were, of Middle Eastern flora, fauna, and geology. All of them were driven by the need to reconcile biblical faith and modern science. And all of them decided that the best way to do so was to emphasize the physical reality of Palestine: its rocks and trees and monuments — even its Muslim and Jewish inhabitants — as authentic relics of the biblical period; everything depicted, and the way everything was depicted, had one main purpose: not to be charming or nostalgic or decorative but to evoke holiness. To his credit, Davis does make use of Eliade's discussion of sacred space in this context (formal analysis of the paintings).

Davis is to be congratulated for avoiding jargon. Nevertheless, he succumbs on a few occasions to the "political correctness" associated with deconstruction. Yes, the Americans who dressed up in vaguely Oriental costumes while prancing around Palestine Park could be accused of "cultural insensitivity" for vicariously replacing the actual but presumably benighted residents of Palestine. And, yes, some Americans had economic and political designs on Palestine. But Davis ascribes to these people — those who designed Palestine Park, say, and those who visited it — only the most cynical motivations (whether conscious or

unconscious). That seems both ungenerous and reductive.

The same currently fashionable bias is present in the discussion of photography. Yes, it could be argued that photographers used their technological and ideological "gaze" to marginalize or "objectify" the Holy Land's native residents. In view of what others have written (both then and more recently), the photographs can be used to support that claim. But many of the photographs can be interpreted in other ways as well. Davis argues that by photographing the Arabs, American photographers showed contempt for them. And maybe that was true in some cases. But I suspect that Davis would have criticized these photographers for the same reason no matter how they had depicted the Arabs — or even if they had not included Arabs at all. This approach is flawed, moreover, because Davis neglects the fact that contempt for the peasants and nomads of Palestine was characteristic not only of Christian countries but of Islamic ones as well. This mentality had long been common, for example, in sophisticated urban centres such as Constantinople, capital of the empire that really did own Palestine (although Turkish landowners seldom bothered to visit their holdings, let alone to live there).

It seems safe to say that every civilization — an urban phenomenon by definition — involves some degree of condescension of the educated elite for their country cousins. Edward Said's discussion of Orientalism notwithstanding, this is not a specifically Western problem. Besides, Davis fails to account for similar depictions of human figures in non-Western art (which would never, of course, be attacked these days on ideological grounds).<sup>1</sup>

But these are minor quibbles (because Davis indulges in deconstruction hardly anywhere except in Chapter 4). *The Landscape of Belief* should be required reading for anyone interested in American studies, religious studies, art history, popular culture, or material culture. It is well illustrated (although any art book should have more than seven colour plates). It is equipped not only with notes but with an index and extensive bibliography as well.

#### NOTES

1. In Chinese and Japanese painting, for example, human figures are always reduced to tiny and insignificant features of the landscape (or those whose only purpose is to guide viewers into the cosmic landscape they contemplate). It could be argued this phenomenon was different because both the

painters and their human subjects were Chinese. But the former probably saw the latter as very alien all the same. The painters were highly educated members of the Confucian elite, after all, and their human subjects were peasants and artisans — that is, "primitives."