



Materializing the Bible

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DIGITAL SCHOLARSHIP REVIEW

Materializing the Bible, by James Bielo. <https://www.materializingthebible.com>

The digital turn in the humanities and social sciences have, among other things, given rise to various projects of digital scholarship that store, catalog, and utilize various digital techniques for research and educational purposes. One of the main benefits of such projects apart from making information widely accessible to educators and scholars is the possibility of creating spaces where an interested public can engage with scholarly resources and thus also hopefully help to foster more dialog between the academic community and society at large. Such digital scholarship, however, also raises critical questions of research ethics, methodologies, classification, and selection. For instance, how does one accurately represent religious and/or ideological phenomena without reproducing the scriptural, historical, ethnic, and political at work in these installations? How does one ensure methodological transparency? And how does one construct digital projects that can help advance a comparative and critical scholarship on religious or other phenomena? These questions are obviously not unique to a digital environment but might nevertheless be especially crucial to consider when the audience is theoretically speaking, everyone with an internet access, and when the stored information is being immortalized on the web

In most of these areas the project *Materializing the Bible* which is ‘an interactive, curated catalogue of biblically themed attractions’ shows both awareness and a strong willingness to deal with these crucial questions. The project was launched in 2015 and is run from the Department of Anthropology at the University of Miami. It covers Protestant, Catholic and, to a lesser extent Jewish and Latter-Day Saints sites, that in different ways transforms the Bible into physical, interactive and choreographed environments, for purposes of immersion, personal piety, religious education and conversion. These attractions range from small ‘biblical gardens’ and Bible museums to much more ambitious projects like the ‘full-scale’ replicas of Noah’s ark (*Ark Encounter*, Kentucky), or the *Temple of Solomon* (São Paulo, Brazil). To date, the projects cover around 480 different biblically themed attractions, in various parts of the world. The explicit ambition of the project is to provide a resource for multiple audiences: scholars involved in various disciplines relating to religion, tourism, entertainment, etc.; educators in academia and religious institutions; and, ‘fellow travelers’ who are looking for their next destination.

The structure of the site is generally informative and intuitive. The different bible-based attractions are categorized by themes: ‘re-creations’, ‘gardens’, ‘and creationist sites’ and, ‘bible history museums’. In addition, the project also includes lists of past and possible parks, a world map with the locations of various attractions, as well as resources for further study including data from biblical parks (and in one case the media coverage of the construction and opening of a park), scholarship for further reading and discussion questions for educators and study groups.

Materializing the Bible, however, is not only an informative portal but, like its object of study, also tries to immerse visitors in the world of religious phenomena. The project leader, James S. Bielo, Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the University of Miami, has elsewhere called this immersion a ‘shared imperative’ between the project and the biblically themed parks that it is trying to document (Bielo, 2018). This ‘shared imperative’ is perhaps most visible in the ‘tours’ section of the project, which, arguably could be considered the heart of the ambition of *Materializing the Bible* and its intent to not only present but also utilize some of the same immersive techniques as the sites it curates. In the tours section it is possible to explore seven different bible-based attractions – five located in the US, one in Australia, and one in Israel – through narratives, ethnographic data such as photos of attractions, videos of tour guide performances, park maps, and virtual tours. The narratives are direct and descriptive, more resembling informative text in tour brochures than academic analytical writing. This is by design. The aim of the tours is to allow for a visitor

to be ‘caught up in the phenomenon of religious tourist attractions’ rather than simply reading about them in scholarly text (Bielo 2018, p. 298). This is a fascinating ambition, and perhaps also the most useful section of *Materializing the Bible* for scholars interested in religious tourism and the ways in which the Bible is put to use by religious communities for the sake of entertainment, immersion, and conversion. As the project develops, it would be interesting if more locations would be included as tours, particularly locations outside of North America in order to allow for more cross-contextual comparisons and to be able to explore the social role of the Bible in non-US contexts. Most of the sites covered are located either in North America or, to a lesser extent Europe with relatively few sites in Africa, Asia and Latin America (the whole continent of Africa, for instance, has only five documented Biblically themed parks on the site). It is understandable this digital project pays more attention to sites in the US but considering the rapid spread of Christianity in the global South one would have expected more representation in the catalog.

Another issue worth noticing is the lack of a search engine that would make it possible for the visitor to explore the database with their own criteria such as dates for the building of the parks, denominational affiliation, regions, size, number of visitors, etc. Such a function, I believe, would provide much value for researchers with various types of projects and allow *Materializing the Bible* more flexibility as a research tool. While some of these data are possible to find out through clicking the various parks on the site it is a somewhat time-consuming and difficult work without the help of a search engine.

These criticisms aside, this is a very promising project and it has already contributed to the inter-disciplinary discussion about religion, entertainment, and place, judging by the solid scholarly bibliography also included in the project. For scholars, educators and tourists that are interested or engaged in pilgrimages, and the various entanglements of religion, politics, and place in modernity the project provides a highly valuable, and entertaining, resource.

Reference

Bielo, J. S. (2018). Immersion as shared imperative: Entertainment of/in digital scholarship. *Religion* 48 (2):291–301.

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