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Chapter 16

Missionary Philology and the Invention of Bibleland

The concept of Bible land became salient in the nineteenth century in the work of American missionaries. They deployed philological and cartographic discourses to facilitate the valorisation of bibleland as the story of origins that they imposed on a space that was cluttered with other stories. Their work inaugurated what could be termed colonial philology, a scholarly attempt to re-present space based on the conflation of texts, languages, and geography.

For the Land, whither thou goest in to possess it,
is not as the land of Egypt, from whence ye came out,
where thou sowedst thy seed,
and wateredst it with thy foot,
as a garden of herbs.

Deuteronomy 11:10

In the nineteenth century, colonial philology defined the means of communication with the natives by valorising the connections between land and language. The philological intervention in the geography of the Levant ensured the paradigmatic position of the Bible as the colonial framework of communication; specifically, by decentring the Bible from its marginal (but foundational) status in the canon of Arabic letters and transforming it into the translation of a Western text into the Arabic language. In this chapter, I build on Edward Said's argument that Orientalism "is – and does not simply represent – a considerable dimension of modern political-intellectual culture, and as such has less to do with the Orient than it does with 'our' world."¹ By examining key missionary texts, I show that the revolution in biblical studies contributed to elaborating a concept of "bibleland" for the entire Levantine region (from Mesopotamia and Syria to Palestine).² However, because of its contemporary salience for the continued colonization of Palestine, I focus on those geographical instances of the discourse of bibleland that had direct cartographic bearing on the land of Palestine.

I argue that the instrumental use of the Bible as a tool for the cartographic mapping of bibleland has a tradition that goes back as far as the history of pilgrimage.

¹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 12.

² I use the terms Levant and Levantine, as politically (and historically) neutral categories of space. Syria and Palestine as labels linked to competing national narratives may confuse the reader.

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What changes in the nineteenth century is that the maps that the cartographic knowledge produced took on a significance that far exceeds the Christian interests of the missionaries I discuss in this chapter. Instead, through the reinvention of the bibleland concept in terms of a “scientific” knowledge process, the idea of bibleland acquired a dominance that exceeded the colonial interests of Western powers in the nineteenth century. This chapter in particular draws out the links that were forged between philology and the colonial reinvention of the Levantine space as bibleland, to examine how the concept of bibleland was scientifically legitimized in order to fit the hegemonic paradigms of secular modernity. I claim the concept of bibleland to be a reinvention because of the way this concept organizes the missionary religio-political narrative that provides a coherent rationale for the missionary vocation, as a project that intended to accelerate the arrival of the End Time. The bibleland travelogues that I discuss here displaced the local interpretations of space to make room for a missionary translation of the Bible onto the landscape. This resulted in the emergence of colonial philology, defined as the instrumental use of philology to legitimize geographic control of colonized space. The missionary use of colonial philology functioned as a framework to mediate the spatial re-inscription of colonial tropes onto the local/Palestinian landscape, conflating geography with the text of the Bible.

In order to examine how the missionaries instrumentalised the Bible in their description of the land of Palestine, I turn to two works: one of geography and the other a travelogue. The first book I examine, William Thomson’s *The Land and the Book* (1880), is representative of a popular genre of bibleland travelogues in the nineteenth century.³ Thomson, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) missionary to Palestine who arrived there in 1832, became more deeply involved in the mission’s educational activities in all of Syria and was one of the missionaries who did the basic work for the establishment of the Syrian Protestant College, now the American University of Beirut. This travelogue was written towards the end of his tenure in the Levant and reveals his poetic flair and penchant for Romantic descriptions. The other work I examine carries the names of Bible translator Eli Smith and Bible scholar Edward Robinson. It is also a travelogue but distinguishes itself from the popular nineteenth century genre by its more scientific airs and taste for cartographic accuracy. It is titled *Biblical Research in Palestine* (1841) and was probably based on the journals Robinson kept during his travels in Palestine accompanied by Smith, who acted as his translator.⁴

This chapter examines the tropes and methods that cohered into a narrative of bibleland. I define this narrative as belonging to the sub-discipline of colonial

³ William M. Thomson, *The Land and the Book or, Biblical Illustrations Drawn from the Manners and Customs, the Scenes and Scenery, of the Holy Land* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1880).

⁴ Edward Robinson, *Biblical Researches in Palestine and in the Adjacent Regions I* (London: John Murray, 1841); Edward Robinson, *Biblical Researches in Palestine: Mount Sinai and Arabia Petraea III* (London: John Murray, 1841).

philology; a scholarly attempt to represent space based on the conflation of texts and languages with geography. In this strand of philology, geographical reconstruction bases itself on the authority of prior texts rather than on permitting the experience of space to guide the cartographic process. Whereas Thomson's work is important for the visual representations of bibleland as idyllic landscape, Robinson's work became the basis of one of the most important cartographic works on the Holy Land in the nineteenth century; the maps of Palestine that were drawn by Heinrich Kiepert (1818–1899), which in turn became the basis for subsequent maps on Palestine that were undertaken by British cartographers.⁵

In the nineteenth century, missionary philology of bibleland succeeded in exchanging the social present of the Levant through a scientific method that combined linguistics with cartography. At that time, the missionary philology of bibleland valorised the historical value of bibleland over the social present of the Levant. As the anthropologist Johannes Fabian notes in his study of Swahili, colonial linguistics was “among the preconditions for establishing regimes of colonial power.”⁶ In the African setting of Fabian's study, the missionaries began their bible work by writing grammars and lexicons that would ultimately allow them to translate the Bible into the local languages of the African continent. In many parts of Africa, the Bible was of negligible significance prior to the arrival of the missionaries – thus introducing a translation of the Bible meant legitimatizing mastery of the local language. By contrast, the Levant was laden with biblical significance for millennia. Mastery of the language was hardly sufficient, for local biblical communities had been translating their Scriptures into Arabic since at least the eighth century. As Ussama Makdisi writes, “at the heart of the difference between the biblical land and Africa was the missionaries' perception of the cluttered rather than vast emptiness of the country.”⁷ In order to master this cluttered space, the missionaries produced cartographic narratives which were subsequently translated into maps of the Holy Land and the Levant. As the best way to control the means of communication with the local population, reordering the space of the Levant facilitated the translation of inhabited spaces into a biblical geographical lexicon that at once validated the biblical past in the eyes of the local inhabitants, while dialectically depreciating earlier local interpretations of the holiness of their space.⁸ In even more foundational ways than Fabian's African setting, the missionaries to the Levant

⁵ Heinrich Kiepert, “Plan of Jerusalem: Sketched from Sieber and Catherwood, Corrected by the Measurements of Robinson and Smith.” London: John Murray, 1841. <https://geo.nyu.edu/catalog/princeton-1c18dj30c>.

⁶ Johannes Fabian, *Language and Colonial Power: The Appropriation of Swahili in the Former Belgian Congo, 1880–1938* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 3.

⁷ Ussama Makdisi, “Reclaiming the Land of the Bible: Missionaries, Secularism, and Evangelical Modernity,” *The American Historical Review* 102, no. 3 (June 1997): 689.

⁸ See for example the narratives and myths about the Levant in Yehoshua Frenkel's “Byabars and the Sacred Geography of Bilad al-Sham: A Chapter in the Islamization of Syria's Landscape,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 25 (2001), 153–70.

displayed an “all-pervasive proclivity to express the proclamation of the Christian message in spatial categories and metaphors.”⁹ Philology was the key that unlocked the cartographic potential of the Bible in mapping out the Levantine geography. In what follows, I first provide a quick overview of the general state of biblical scholarship and philology in Europe at the time of missionary travels to the Levant. I then provide a summary of the methodologies that the missionaries used for gathering data. This analysis examines how philology was used to legitimize and conflate the colonial desire for the land with the missionary discourse of Christian salvation.

Biblical Philology in the West: A Sketch

The eighteenth- and nineteenth-century revolution in European biblical scholarship cast doubt on the idea of the so-called ur-Bible.¹⁰ This biblical revolution discovered that even in Hebrew, ancient Greek, and Syriac, many versions of the Bible existed, which in turn kept pointing to an even more ancient Greek or Hebrew text than the authoritative texts relied on by the national churches. The destabilization of a point of textual origin was related, in concrete terms, to the discovery of earlier (and diverse) Bible texts than what was customarily thought of as the earliest texts of the Bible. Following the early Renaissance contribution to biblical scholarship (and the Reformation) of the Dutch humanist at Cambridge, Desiderius Erasmus, who collated and translated the Greek text known as the *Textus Receptus*, biblical scholars assumed that they had finally discovered the true origins of the Bible.¹¹ But this was not the case, and the philological revolution of the Enlightenment demonstrated the difficulty of ever finding the most ancient text of the Bible. Closely connected to the inability to point to an authoritative textual origin were the comparative philological discoveries made in Sanskrit by the English Indologist, Sir William James (1746–1794) among others¹² and what came to be known as the Indo-European language family.¹³

Recent scholarship on the history of nineteenth-century philology exposes the lacuna leading to the inherent racism and colonial logic associated with the discipline; at least since Said published *Orientalism*. The recent interest in the history of the

9 Fabian, *Language and Colonial Power*, 79.

10 Thomas R. Trautmann, *Aryans and British India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Said, *Orientalism*, 17, 202.

11 Recent scholarship historicizes Erasmus's work and shows the extent to which the *Textus Receptus* relied on translations into Greek of Latin Scriptures in the medieval period. See Bruce M. Metzger and Bart D. Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968).

12 Said summarizes Jones's works as garnering his ambition to “subdue the infinite Orient to a complete digest.” Said, *Orientalism*, 78.

13 Trautmann, *Aryans and British India*.

discipline distinguishes itself from Said's blanket dismissal of nineteenth-century scholarship by going into painstaking detail in recollecting the scientific and political context that shaped the methodologies developed by European philologists in the nineteenth century. In the scholarship of Thomas Trautmann, Suzanne Marchand, Tuska Benes, Rachel Willson, Maurice Olender and others,¹⁴ we encounter philology's dependence on biblical dogma – especially on the stubborn faith in the veracity of the Book of Genesis and its stories of the Biblical Flood and the Tower of Babel – to articulate language taxonomies in the nineteenth century. Perhaps more than any other discovery and research into other civilizations, the Western colonial encounter with the Vedas and with Sanskrit produced serious religious anxieties across theological and literary disciplines in key Western universities.¹⁵

The notion that Sanskrit was more ancient than Hebrew was innovative in the field of biblical studies. As Benes and Olender argued, the (mostly German) biblical scholars and philologists made astounding discoveries of ancient manuscripts that contested the divine genesis of human language, especially after groundbreaking work in Sanskrit studies that revealed it to be a more ancient language than Hebrew. This discovery radically challenged the myth of creation advanced by the Book of Genesis. In some philological circles, Adam's birthplace and burial ground was purported to be in India, and some archaeologists even went on excursions to find the proof for their theories. By the end of the eighteenth century, "philology had decisively weakened the bond between the Bible and theology."¹⁶ Benes' focus on the German branch of Sanskrit philology reveals a different trajectory from Trautmann's tremendous book on the nuances within Anglophone Orientalism. Moving his study to the English scholarly realm, which preceded the development of Indology in Germany, Trautmann argues that the beginnings of Sanskrit philology were predicated on what he termed "Mosaic ethnology," an ethnological worldview that assumes the biblical story of the decedents of Noah (Shem, Ham, and Japhet) to be a historical fact and, consequently, that the history of the Great Flood and the destruction of the Tower of Babel were treated as the earliest beginnings of linguistic and national diversity. In this worldview, Sanskrit was treated as the

¹⁴ Rachel Beckles Willson, *Orientalism and Musical Mission: Palestine and the West* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Trautmann, *Aryans and British India*; Suzanne Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race and Scholarship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Tuska Benes, *In Babel's Shadow: Language, Philology, and the Nation in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2008); Maurice Olender, *The Languages of Paradise: Race, Religion, and Philology in the Nineteenth Century*, *Les Langues Du Paradis* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992).

¹⁵ Maurice Olender's argument that the Vedas came to supplant the Bible has been further developed in the work of Thomas Trautmann, who reads through the work of William Jones, to show how the idea of Indo-European language took the story of Babel as a historically plausible point of origin that is capable of supporting his elaborations of language taxonomies.

¹⁶ Benes, *In Babel's Shadow*, 9.

Ursprache that provides a “rational defense of the Bible out of the material collected by Orientalist scholarship.”¹⁷ Trautmann focuses especially on William Jones and his impact on the development of Sanskrit studies in Europe.

As Trautmann shows, Jones and his early compatriots sifted through Sanskrit texts to confirm the stories of Genesis. For Jones, the corollaries he found about the Great Flood, the Tower of Babel, and other stories from Genesis in the *Padama Purāna*, confirmed the Mosaic narratives through the “testimony of other nations,” claiming that “its inspired nature is further proved by the predictions of the Old Testament which are fulfilled in the Gospel.”¹⁸ In doing so, Jones secured his canonical place in English academic and missionary narratives of the period. His method, despite its biblical axioms, presents rational arguments still held today for the grammatical and lexical links between Sanskrit, Latin, and Greek. Based on his biblical axioms, he dismissed the temporal structure of the Sanskrit scripture as mythological, on the grounds that we have “no history unmixed with fable, except that of the turbulent and variable, but eminently distinguished, nation descended from ABRAHAM.”¹⁹ Yet Jones’s rational methods, despite their support of scripture, proved to be too clandestine for the emergent nineteenth-century evangelism. In the wake of the French Revolution, Jones’s views on the Sanskrit origins of human civilization were seen by the missionaries of his day, especially by Grant, to come too close to the scepticism of Voltaire, and evangelical scholars worked aggressively to contain Jones’ impact on the course of English Indo-philology.²⁰ For the evangelists, Jones’s open reception of the Sanskrit scripture was in danger of equating the Indians with high civilization, an idea that ran counter to the civilizing aims of missionary activity. If Jones unwittingly facilitated a tribal narrative that links the British to the Indians through linguistic reasoning, the missionaries used developmental values of civilization, progress, and modernity to justify their own grand contribution to the East India Company and to colonialism at large. With the death of Jones, Anglophone Indology stopped dead in its tracks after the missionaries succeeded in equating the learning of Sanskrit (and other indigenous languages) with complicity with the backward native Indians. With their rise in the ranks of the East India Company, the missionaries succeeded in devaluing language learning as the basis of Orientalist knowledge. In sum, the missionaries did not dismiss Jones’ discoveries but instead worked to weaken the resources allocated to the philological enterprise after his discoveries.²¹ England had to wait until 1868, when the German Sanskritist Max Müller was awarded the chair of Comparative Philology at Oxford, before Indology could be resumed.

¹⁷ Trautmann, *Aryans and British India*, 42.

¹⁸ Trautmann, *Aryans and British India*, 51.

¹⁹ Trautmann, *Aryans and British India*, 52. Quoted in Trautmann.

²⁰ Trautmann, *Aryans and British India*, 102.

²¹ Trautmann, *Aryans and British India*, 101.

In this hiatus of almost fifty years, German academia took over from where William Jones left off. By that time, the taxonomies of the language families had become commonplace – consequently impacting the value of Semitic. This devaluation of Semitic was then manipulated discursively to use the Indo-European languages as evidence of the superiority of the Aryan ur-race. This, according to Benes, was “part of a larger theological effort to minimize the importance of the ancient Hebrews in the emergence of monotheism.”²² On the other hand, the early decades of the nineteenth century also saw the transformation of the Bible to a secularized cultural document, a text that was guaranteed a place within the classical European canon of letters but that did not necessarily have to be read for devotional purposes. Yet the Bible by this time was being entirely read in the vernacular, thus contributing to the emergence of modern forms of nationalism. While this process was started in the Reformation for the European continent, it was missionary efforts that rearticulated the link between the Bible and land. This link was brought out through philological innovations that succeeded in reconstructing an alternative anchoring point from which to receive and interpret the Bible. As William Canton, the official historian of the British missionaries, put it in a remark about a visit by the Oriental Congress to the library of the Bible House in London: “While the Congress was studying knotty points of literary and ethnological interest, the British and Foreign Bible Society was practically solving them.”²³ The philological revolution ensured that through new translations, God indeed spoke in German, English or Bangla, while Hebrew became devalued as a sacred language.

The missionaries who went to the Levant were by and large adherents of the new trends in biblical philology and accepted biblical scholarship for its truth-value. Evidence shows that Bible translator Eli Smith was well-acquainted with and relied on developments in biblical scholarship for his translation of the Bible.²⁴ The devaluation of Hebrew as a sacred language was becoming more prevalent in biblical circles, which was becoming concurrent with the missionary effort to replace the importance of the original Biblical text with the land. The travelogues to the Levant worked towards this end by transforming the land itself into the sacred “language” of God. This transformation had impact not only on the Levantine landscape, but generally on connecting the Bible in any language to national and colonial land. By turning the land into the language of God, the Bible’s ancient languages were cast as old translations of the divine language of God as it is manifest in the Levantine landscape.

The bibleland trope had a clear function in the task of turning land into divine language: it restabilised the biblical text as a foundation of Christian faith after the text was destabilized, after its origins were subjected to the philologists’ doubt. In the

²² Benes, *In Babel’s Shadow*, 199.

²³ William A Canton, *History of the British and Foreign Bible Society*, 5 vols., vol. 3 (London: John Murray, 1910), 61.

²⁴ Isaac H. Hall, “The Arabic Bible of Drs. Eli Smith and Cornelius V. A. Van Dyck,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 11 (1885): 279.

WADY SŪRĀR—SCENE OF THE RETURN OF THE ARK.

Fig. 16.1: Scene of the Return of the Ark – Wady Sūrār, from William M. Thomson's *The Land and the Book, or, Biblical Illustrations Drawn from the Manners and Customs, the Scenes and Scenery, of the Holy Land*, 1880.

aftermath of the philological revolution, missionaries arriving in the Levant took it upon themselves to reinforce the shaken roots of the biblical narrative by paradoxically accepting advances in biblical studies and philology, and consequently instrumentalising philology in order to reconstruct, in geographic terms, the links between the Bible and the land. In this way, Sanskrit, for example, can be implicitly accepted as older than Hebrew; however, the Bible retains its status as divine Word, except that the emphasis moves from sacred language to the idea of holy land.

For the work of translation that mediated the first contact between the missionaries and the indigenous populations of the world, such a loosening of the linguistic roots turned the Bible into the ultimate vehicular text for the colonial occupation of new territory. In the absence of textual stability, the land was used to anchor Revelation in the Levant as well as elsewhere. However, global success depended to a large extent on the missionary ability to reduce the context of the Levantine region to the status of divine bibleland. As the Americans repeatedly wrote, their enterprise in the Levant was clearly defined as an illustration of the biblical message. For its success, this illustration depended on anthropological real time and especially on the ability of the missionaries to cast the Levantine natives as coeval with biblical time. Suzanne Marchand also draws attention to the function of antiquity in the critical sensibilities of philologists alienated by modern lifestyles. Yet here there is something more colonial at play than merely taking solace in antiquity to escape the pressures of modern life. The edifying clang of the philological method provided effective strategies for the discursive temporal distancing necessary for equating the lived spaces of the Levant into biblical tableaux from the Bible.

Step One: Biblical Illustration

In its title, Thomson's *The Land and the Book* exemplifies the approach to the land as divine language.²⁵ This is not the only promising title one can examine. Isaac Bird (1793–1876), one of the earliest missionaries to come to the Levant, wrote *Bible Work in Bible Land*, which tells the story of the day-to-day life of the missionaries against a historical backdrop of daily political affairs, civil strife, and Bible work in corners identified as bibleland.²⁶ Another scholar worth mentioning is William Goodell (1792–1867), who was in the Levant at the same time as Bird and who wrote what he considered to be an anthropological work, *The Old and the New . . . Oriental Customs Elucidating Scripture*, which explains the kinds of people one can expect to

²⁵ For a good description of the formal qualities of this genre, see Daniel Martin Varisco, "Framing the Holy Land in Nineteenth Century Protestant BibleCustoms Texts," in *Orientalism Revisited: Art, Land and Voyage*, ed. I.R. Netton (Routledge, 2013).

²⁶ Isaac Bird, *Bible Work in Bible Land* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1872).

find in the Levant. In this book of anthropological distancing, the old indeed are the locals, and the missionaries are the new.²⁷ Unlike the anthropological perspectives of those travelogues, Thomson's work moulded his perspective on the locals exclusively through the Bible. As he wrote, he was motivated by a desire to give evidence of biblical truth and that the "main object is biblical illustration" – a task he equated with truth.²⁸ For him, the best way to illustrate the truth was to provide the reader with a *tableau vivant* of key biblical passages by describing the contemporary lives of the Levantines he encountered. Issam Nassar articulates it clearly when he draws on the parallel between the speed with which Jerusalem was growing and the representations of the "city as an ancient place that belonged more to the world of the Bible than to this world."²⁹ A similar process was taking place in Thomson's narrative.

Thomson's book is about his daily discoveries of God's Word-Turned-Flesh in the Levantine landscape. He proclaimed that his labour was in the service of his readers, who were eager to reconnect with the divine language of God. The Bible, as he believed, was born in the Levant. As he writes, "the Land where the Word-Made-Flesh dwelt among men must continue to be an important part of Revelation."³⁰ The land speaks in a divine tongue, and yet despite this, the visitor to bibleland would be "disenchanted too soon."³¹ This is because the Oriental masses around him were no longer in touch with the sacredness of the land; the present no longer held echoes of the past. He thus fashioned himself as an explorer of past traces, in the customs of those "people worthy of being saved."³² Thomson expected in advance that Truth would take the shape of fleshed-out traces of the Bible as it manifests itself in the present life of the local people.

He writes, "this birthplace has given form and color to [the Bible's] language. The underlying basis of this wonderful dialect of the kingdom of heaven is found in the land itself."³³ The land, rather than the original language of the Bible, was now the dialect of God. In poetic details, Thomson's book provides a description of the Levantine flora and fauna with its domestic and wild plants and animals. The sounds, sights, and smells are described with unhurried details, as are the local natives. Describing the crowds in what used to be the main gate of the city of Jaffa, Thomson writes, "the crowd is more dense, noisy and picturesque here . . . What tempting groups for the pencil or the brush of the artist and the photographer's camera . . ."

²⁷ William Goodell, *The Old and the New: The Changes of Thirty Years in the East, with Some Allusions to Oriental Customs as Elucidating Scripture* (New York: M.W. Dodd, 1858); Bird, *BibleWork in BibleLand*.

²⁸ Thomson, *The Land and the Book*, 11.

²⁹ Issam Nassar, "'Biblication' in the Service of Colonialism: Jerusalem in Nineteenth-Century Photography," *Third Text* 20, no. 3/4 (2006): 317.

³⁰ Thomson, *The Land and the Book*, 1.

³¹ Thomson, *The Land and the Book*, 7.

³² Varisco, "Framing the Holy Land in Nineteenth Century Protestant Bible Customes Texts," 194.

³³ Thomson, *The Land and the Book*, 2.

and then a few lines later, that “we shall have the opportunity to contemplate them at our leisure.”³⁴ As landscape, the murmurs of the locals can be likened to the breaking of the waves on the seashore, and their wildness is similar to the beasts that live among them. If they are given the space to speak at all, they are often naïve, ignorant, and rashly amusing.³⁵ For him, the natives formed part of the *mise-en-scène*: we hardly ever meet them as characters, and only sometimes as instruments in the roles of cooks, porters, or Oriental hosts. More often, the natives function as biblical illustrations; tanners that evoke images from Isaiah, or patriarchs who have a trivial resemblance to Abraham. “This amazing ability to discover the land without discovering the people,” to use the words of Beshara Doumai, “may very well have paved the way for the emergence of the popular mythical image of Palestine as a land without a people.”³⁶

Take also Thomson’s visual translation of the landscape as divine language. In the travelogue, Thomson included several of his drawings that illustrated the divine splendour of the land. In the drawing reproduced here Thomson achieved, through aesthetic means, this connection between the land and the Bible. In this illustration that he subtitled “The Return of the Ark,” we encounter a scene that is biblical (Fig. 16.1).³⁷ The painting depicts a type of tabernacle, framed through light swathes. This landscape is God’s house, a kind of temporary tent that awaits the more permanent light of God’s grace. The peasant represents the two temporal planes simultaneously: he is a native self, perhaps someone that Thomson encountered as he traversed a Palestinian village. He is also Noah, as the title of the drawing indicates. The ultimate light of the tabernacle comes after the storm (another Exodus?) and parallels a grey rainbow that disappears into the storm. Noah is travelling with his animals on the course that leads them all to the light, and they will cross a meandering river before they arrive. Thomson layers the charcoal illustration into three planes, depicting a more simplified form of Purgatory. The light that centres the painting illustrates the End Time, vertically positioned with the aid of the rainbow. The river that criss-crosses the illustration in its midsection separates what in missionary parlance is called the “temporal world” from the eschatological space of a world that overcomes time. This painting is of a landscape, and the native is inherently part of it; the viewers are detached from the scene, in that they are taking in the landscape from a distance. Yet this is a drawing that invites us to participate. If we take up the invitation, this drawing promises us a tour into the holy; and for the faithful, their footsteps will hasten the turbaned peasant into his journey towards the divine. The title of this drawing is also telling, as it suggests that this world – the one on the right of the river – will be covered with water; the river will arise with all its rush and fury. To borrow from Simon Schama’s great study of landscape, this is the “typology of the Jordan torrent

³⁴ Thomson, *The Land and the Book*, 7.

³⁵ Thomson, *The Land and the Book*, 50–51.

³⁶ Nassar, “‘Biblification’ in the Service of Colonialism,” 323.

³⁷ Nassar, “‘Biblification’ in the Service of Colonialism,” 135.

[supplying] the rudimentary rituals of cleansing and redemption that evolved into baptism.”³⁸ It will flood and erase the traces of this world’s sins. The promise of light is then elaborated further in the text of the book that can be also described as a book dedicated to salvation.

Thomson enforced textual – specifically biblical – features on the land as part of a futurative project; a utopian post-temporality of Messianic contours. The depiction of the land into a visual narrative translates the biblical text into landscape painting to make one simple point: the land itself is holy, and its inhabitants need to be alerted to the sacredness of their surroundings to hasten the Messianic future. As part of the landscape, the natives paradoxically belong to a distant past that is denied coevality with the missionary moderns and the natives need to be modernized in the ways of the new religion to accomplish eschatological desires. “The whole narrative,” Thomson repeats with slight variation at different points in the narrative, “is Oriental, pure and simple, and the entire scene might be enacted today in the audience-chamber of any Oriental potentate. And there are plenty of wise widows in this land who could act the cunning emissary of Joab [sic] to perfection.”³⁹

For Thomson, those biblical characters were neither prophets, nor were they chosen people. Rather they were sinners delaying the arrival of the Messiah. In their eschatological worldview, the missionaries believed that their presence in the land of the Bible would teach those biblical natives to become pious Christians. Thomson, who was responsible for the opening and supervision of missionary schools in the Levant, was especially dedicated to correcting the customs of the natives. The eschatological motives were twined with the transformation of Palestine and the Levant into the land of the Bible. Educating the local population, after all, rested on the success of turning them firstly into sinning biblical stock figures. This was done through techniques of temporal distancing that Thomson achieved through landscape. Yet there were other more “scientific” ways of achieving the same effect. Missionary geography through its use of modern technology legitimized the narrative of bibleland in ways that landscape painting and poetic narrative simply could not. I now turn to the travelogue of the first missionary geographical travelogue, a book published in 1841 by Edward Robinson (1794–1863).

Step Two: Cartographic Representation

Upon the publication of his book *Biblical Researches*, Edward Robinson, the Andover Seminary professor of sacred literature extraordinaire, became known as the “father of biblical geography.” Robinson, the nineteenth century founder of today’s thriving

³⁸ Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (London: HarperCollins, 1995), 264.

³⁹ Thomson, *The Land and the Book*, 331.

discipline of biblical geography, does not share the poetic sensibilities we encounter in Thomson. His narrative voice is less predicated on the aesthetics of landscape; his is a more measured and measuring style. The work is one of biblical cartography and has inspired some of the most famous maps of the Levant. This is how he describes Jerusalem in his notes:

The materials in question have a bearing chiefly upon the more exact measurement of the city walls from one gate or projecting corner to another; upon the direction of the wall from the Yafa Gate northwestwards, (which hitherto has been erroneously given on all plans as due West,) and the consequent slight change in the position of the Latin convent; and upon the more accurate delineation of the vallies of Hinnom and Jehoshaphat with their fountains and reservoirs, as also of the Mount of Olives . . . In constructing this map, after determining the position of the Latin convent, by a mean deduced from the best observations, to be in Lat. 31°46'43"N. and Long. 32°52'36" E. from Paris, or 35°13'E. from Greenwich, the plan of the city and its immediate neighborhood was reduced and inserted as the central point.⁴⁰

Employing a functional tone, Robinson detached himself from the land as he connected its cartographic information to the colonial metropolises of his time. Eli Smith, his companion on this trip, was his translator, assistant and occasional note taker. He had just received approval from the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions to embark on a new translation of the Bible to Arabic. Smith's rare fluency in Arabic facilitated the "excavations" of biblical topology from the lips of the locals. The trip, one may guess, was part of a crucial preparation for the young Smith to undertake the translation of the Bible. Published in both their names, but written mostly by Robinson, the travelogue was intended to bolster the evidence of the Levantine setting of the Bible. As Robinson notes he is following a cartographic tradition of authorial pilgrimage written by historians and Christian military leaders who charted the Levant geography according to the textual setting of the Bible.⁴¹ The notes that Robinson later composed into this travelogue were extended to Heinrich Kiepert, the famous cartographer, who under Robinson's supervision produced some of the most famous maps of Palestine.⁴²

Despite the dry academic tone that distinguishes Robinson's account from Thomson's, the maps he produced aestheticize the space by providing a clear bird's-eye aerial rendition of the landscape. In Kiepert's Jerusalem map which he based on Robinson's notes, the texture of the lines produces that bird's eye view (Fig. 16.2).

⁴⁰ E. Robinson, *Biblical Researches in Palestine: Mount Sinai and Arabia Petraea*, vol. 3 (John Murray, 1841), First appendix, 39–40.

⁴¹ To hastily indicate the long line of tradition of geographic beliefs, one can glance at the cartographic representation of Ezekiel 5:5 in the Hereford *Mappa Mundi*.

⁴² E. Robinson, *Biblical Researches in Palestine and in the Adjacent Regions*, vol. 1 (John Murray, 1841), x. The illustration is a map of Jerusalem produced by Kiepert with the supervision of Robinson. See, Heinrich Kiepert, "Plan of Jerusalem: Sketched from Sieber and Catherwood, Corrected by the Measurements of Robinson and Smith," (London, 1841).

Fig. 16.2: Map of Jerusalem, in Edward Robinson's *Biblical Researches in Palestine, and in the Adjacent Regions: A Journal of Travels in the Year 1838*, 1856.

These techniques reproduce a vertical illusion that separates the missionary perspective from Jerusalem's lived space. Surely, most maps produce such a detachment from lived space, and city maps in general have a tendency to reproduce a vertical perspectival relationship.⁴³ What is different with this map, however, is that it is a cartographic translation of the text quoted above. Robinson's text, as we saw, is functional enough to lend itself rather easily to this kind of translation.

Notwithstanding the modern appearance of this map, Kiepert was following a centuries-old tradition of mapmaking that took the Bible for its geographical truth value. This reliance on Robinson, who in turn had relied on the Bible, obscures the faith-based process that went into the making of this map. Instead the viewer is led to assume its "objective" accuracy because it follows the academic rules of citation. By translating Robinson's cartographic travelogue into a map, Kiepert also shaped his spatial rendition within the framework of the opinion of a missionary who only had eyes for the Bible when visiting Palestine. Kiepert's shading techniques aesthetically represent the perspective of the viewer as an organizer of reality, and it is this perspective that Robinson constructs throughout his narrative.

The temporal distancing that structures Robinson's narrative deploys the trope of biblical time in its communication with the natives. Robinson, like Thomson, also casts the natives in the roles of mass biblical figures. In his account, the missionaries are no less biblical, except that the roles they take for themselves are heavenly rather than human. In one episode, we encounter the narrative setting that allows the missionaries to transcend the "temporal" world and to align themselves with heavenly bodies. After a long and dusty journey, Robinson arrives with Smith in the city of *al-Khalil*/Hebron and enters the house of a powerful man. This story is provided early in the book and sets the general tone of the encounter with the locals. He writes:

Our youthful host now proposed, in the genuine style of ancient hospitality, that a servant should wash our feet. This took me by surprise; for I was not aware that the custom still existed here. Nor does it, indeed, toward foreigners; though it is quite common among the natives. We gladly accepted, both for the sake of refreshment and of the scriptural illustration . . . It was the most gratifying minor incident of our whole journey.⁴⁴

For Robinson, this anecdote, like many others, conflates biblical imagery with the lived reality of the locals, *i.e.* with their daily lives and rituals. As his feet are being washed, Robinson layers this narrative with footnotes from the Bible. Some of the scenes he mentions have Messianic purchase for Christian evangelists, such as Genesis 18:4 when Abraham ordered his servants to wash the feet of a stranger who

⁴³ I was emboldened to suggest the question of perspective after reading Sumathi Ramaswamy, "Maps and Mother Goddesses in Modern India," *Imago Mundi* 53 (2001). In this article, Ramaswamy opposes the view that the map is "empty social space." In my mention of perspective, I am trying to understand how the map gives this kind of illusion.

⁴⁴ Robinson, *Biblical Researches in Palestine and in the Adjacent Regions*, 1, 26.

came to visit him after the birth of Ishmael and John 8:5, when Jesus washed the feet of his disciples. Others like Luke 9:2 and 1 Samuel 25:41 were more illustrative of the situation: evangelists preaching the Bible get their feet washed by a slave girl. As biblical portrait, the scene pegs the cartographic approach to bibleland that Robinson charts out to an interpretation of the scientific findings of his mission within the paradigm of evangelical Christianity.

Robinson, by his own admittance, was not revolutionizing the view of a long canon of biblical pilgrimage. Rather, his research intended to present a more scientific entwinement of the Bible to the Levantine landscape. When he first arrived in Sinai, Robinson realized that his predecessors had neglected much of the landscape in their descriptions. He became convinced that “there yet remained much land to be possessed.”⁴⁵ In order to possess the land, Robinson relied on philology. Before he took his cartographic measurements, he first had to ascertain whether the spot of land being surveyed had any biblical relevance. One way to do so was to look for visible archaeological traces. Another was to match up biblical topology to the names of spaces that were in use at the time. The latter method proved to be most effective, especially because the Arabic place-names were analysed through recourse to phonology. In this philological/phonological operation, Robinson could reiterate, according to centuries of established dogma, that the Bible was born in Palestine.

What is special about Robinson’s phonological method is its reliance on anthropological encounters with the locals, who presumably still use biblical place-names, if with some variation. Kamal Salibi’s controversial treatise *The Bible Came from Arabia*, written over a century later, would rely on phonology to challenge the mainstream discipline of biblical geography inaugurated by Robinson.⁴⁶ Salibi contends that the Hebrew Bible originated not in Palestine but in the Arabian Peninsula. No matter what one makes of his conclusions, his method is similar to Robinson’s: namely, he draws on phonology as a useful tool for locating the biblical geography of the Old Testament. In his phonological operations, Salibi proved that we should be looking for the Hebrew Bible not in Palestine but rather in today’s North Yemen and Saudi Arabia. I mention Salibi not so much to offer a choice between these two truth claims, but rather to point to the underlying assumption carried by Robinson: namely, that the Bible came from Palestine; a claim that the current state of the field of biblical archaeology is too polemical to corroborate.⁴⁷ In other words, if one compares both studies, phonology does not seem like an adequate method to establish whether the Bible is in fact historically linked to what the missionaries called bibleland. Yet the scientific

⁴⁵ Robinson, *Biblical Researches in Palestine and in the Adjacent Regions*, 1, 32.

⁴⁶ Kamal Salibi, *The Bible Came from Arabia* (London: J. Cape, 1985).

⁴⁷ For more on the biblical origins of archaeology in Palestine and the instrumental use of archaeology for colonial purposes, see N.A. El-Haj, *Facts on the Ground: Archaeological Practice and Territorial Self-Fashioning in Israeli Society* (University of Chicago Press, 2001).

merit of Robinson's studies remains more or less intact because Robinson applied a science that is associated with accepted modern disciplines. However, the problem with Robinson's deployment of this method is that it is predicated on the assumption that the Bible comes from bibleland. What Robinson's phonology sets out to do is therefore to use scientific means to revise some details in the Christian cartographic tradition. In this tradition, that the Bible came from bibleland is both the assumption and the conclusion, which as Salibi demonstrated cannot be scientifically corroborated by philological means.

Phonology here works as a kind of anthropological archaeology. However, instead of excavating the land, Robinson excavated from the lips of the natives. Phonology also turns the natives into a landscape. Unlike Thomson, this landscape does not feed into a poetic imagination; rather it is a landscape that must be made to reveal the traces of the Bible scientifically. For Robinson and Smith, the natives unwittingly carry the "divine dialect" of the land. Based on information from their lips, Robinson turns Ain Shams into the Bible's Beit Shemesh, *Ain* and *Beit* being so seemingly common as to be interchangeable.⁴⁸ 'Akir is Ekron, while Dura is the biblical Adora because "dropping of the first feeble letter is not uncommon."⁴⁹ Robinson records what the natives say only to correct their pronouncements about the place names against the Bible. What they have to say is important as raw material, which will ultimately be made to take the shape of a word that occurs in the Bible. Contrast this reliance on native knowledge with Thomson's silencing of native narratives about the space in which they live, and with Robinson's earlier silencing of the native host who ordered his feet be washed. In Robinson's account, either the natives could not contribute any useful historical narrative, or their tales failed to meet the demands of historical accuracy. Thus what the natives said might be deemed valuable in only very limited contexts, and only after Robinson and Smith transformed it into biblical evidence. Even when Robinson describes an encounter with a gracious and well-read host, the reader is shown that natives are incapable of providing precise information about the landscape. As Robinson recounts:

Our young host was well acquainted with the region around; but he was now so taken up with examining distant objects through our telescopes that he did not always stop to look at a place before he told its name. For this reason, there may be doubt as to the accuracy of some of the names of places which we wrote down.⁵⁰

For Robinson, the telescope in the hand of an Arab hampers the unmediated spontaneity that he expected his informants to possess. The Arab without a telescope is more useful because his information yields raw data; data that the Arab transmits without thinking. The telescope, on the other hand, can suggest that the Arab is

⁴⁸ Robinson, *Biblical Researches in Palestine: Mount Sinai and Arabia Petraea*, 3, 18.

⁴⁹ Robinson, *Biblical Researches in Palestine: Mount Sinai and Arabia Petraea*, 5, 23.

⁵⁰ Robinson, *Biblical Researches in Palestine: Mount Sinai and Arabia Petraea*, 29.

making conscious judgements about what he is seeing. A telescope is a technology for seeing and seeing, as the missionaries taught in the elementary schools in Beirut, “is the first task that geography needs from us.”⁵¹ This task of interpretation that is called geography is denied the native, and indeed as a geographical book, Robinson’s travelogue is largely free of natives. Outside the historical travelogues written within the Christian tradition of pilgrimage to bibleland and a few renown Arabic historians, Robinson seems most interested in producing a land without people. The role of the native for Robinson is to provide phonological data that can be used to augment an already trusted methodology of cartographic cross-referencing of the Bible with what remains in the landscape. Robinson longed for their absence – except when he used them as subjects for phonological extraction. He wrote impatiently about how they steered him away from the geographical research, so he kept himself and his company aloof to their hospitality. Despite their kindness, the local hosts “deprived us from the greater portion of our time and . . . prevented us from writing down our notes as we had purposed.”⁵² Instead of such time-wasting interactions, Robinson was more keenly interested in the details of the land, and whether the narrow path described in a place corresponded with what historians before him had described about their travels in the books. This neglect of native consciousness facilitated Robinson’s deliberate marginalization of the historical traces of other narratives that he encounters in his travels.

For him, centuries of Islamic rule over this piece of land can be erased from the narrative, disregarded as a small interruption in the atemporal space of the biblical landscape. This is why Robinson is undisturbed when he discloses to his reader his complete ignorance of Islamic history when he stumbled upon Islamic architecture and archaeological traces of “the Holy Land.” In one episode, when Smith and Robinson visit a tower that was clearly Islamic in its architecture, Robinson provided a date for the tower with a margin of error, from the early days of Islamic occupation of the Levant or after the beginning of Ottoman rule, is a little under a millennium.⁵³ Islamic civilization, from its early days until the time of writing, is considered by Robinson and Smith to be nothing more than a brief and fleeting moment in the chronology of the biblical Kingdom of God.

Through missionary landscaping techniques, whether in the poetic renditions of Thomson, or in the cartographic functionality of Robinson and Smith, bibleland emerged as an important trope in the nineteenth century. I have framed this emergence through the revolution in biblical studies taking place in Europe at the time. As I argued, this revolution destabilized key dogmatic beliefs about what constituted the divine language of God. With the advances in Sanskrit studies, the notion that

51 Unknown, *Al-Hay'ah Al-Bahiyyah Fi Al-Kurah Al-Ardiyyah* (Beirut: American Press, 1910).

52 Robinson, *Biblical Researches in Palestine: Mount Sinai and Arabia Petraea*, 194.

53 Robinson, *Biblical Researches in Palestine: Mount Sinai and Arabia Petraea*, 3, 6–7.

Hebrew was the most ancient language was proved wrong. Rather than contradict the findings of comparative philology, American missionaries resolved the problems this revolution caused for the Christian worldview by constructing the notion of bibleland as the original language of God, which was a necessary step for the reformulation of the entire world of the evangelical endeavour into God's tongue. It was no longer Hebrew, but the land itself that spoke the truth of the Gospels. By their own admission, the missionaries were not deviating from the centuries-old tradition of Western Christian travelogues about the bibleland. However, what was decidedly new in their approach was their acceptance of the discoveries of philology for which they hoped to compensate by foregrounding the trope of bibleland as the organizing logos of the Levantine space in which they were working. For this narrative to work, the missionaries had to ensure that the native interpretations of space would remain silent. Their silencing strategies relied on landscaping Palestine in ways that temporally distanced the natives. The natives were turned into details in a biblical scene, to be saved from their sins by the purer faith of the missionaries. When the natives were allowed to say anything about the space in which they lived, their pronouncements were turned into the unconscious transmission of centuries-old biblical truths. Whereas Thomson used poetic landscapes for this purpose, Robinson used philology for his project. Philology was put in the service of the dominance of the biblical narrative. The space that was so reinscribed was called bibleland.