



Materializing the Bible: Scripture, Sensation, Place

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With this insightful book, cultural and linguistic anthropologist James Bielo makes a valuable contribution to the anthropology of religion and the burgeoning field of Material Religion. This emerging discipline broadens the scope of religious studies beyond its traditional focus on belief systems and abstract ideas. Instead, it concentrates on the ‘lived world’—the spaces, objects, and sensations that people inhabit—and how these elements are skilfully woven into personal and religious experiences.

The book considers the material dimensions of Christian tourism and pilgrimage within the landscapes of the United States and Canada. With a particular focus on place, technology, infrastructure, and the interplay of the senses, the investigation seeks to understand how these elements combine to shape a unique expression of lived religious experience, centred on the Bible. An ethnographer of diverse American Christianity, Bielo also leads the ambitious digital project “Materializing the Bible”. This open-access database curates fieldwork and archival data, documenting the choreographed ways people bring their faith to life across the globe.

Using a variety of data sources—ethnographic, archival, and mass media—Bielo’s research in this book examines North American sites that transform Scripture into immersive experiences. Inspired by Kentucky’s “Ark Encounter” theme park (Chapter 4), his work explores a wider landscape of such biblically themed destinations. Bielo eschews linearity, structuring his book as a series of ‘ethnographic slices’—assorted examples examined from various angles, mirroring the immersive experience of the sites themselves (e.g. curated gardens, museums, theme parks).


The book unfolds in three sections. Section I, “Variations on Replication” (Chapters 1–6), explores how these sites utilise verisimilitude to bridge the gap between visitors and the remote biblical past. Through replication or recontextualisation, “Replication accomplishes the powerful cultural work of promising experiential access to a sacralized past” (17). Section II, “The Power of Nature” (Chapters 7–10), examines nature (plants, animals, food, objects) as another pathway to Scripture. Bielo argues that these elements “help us to think closely about the ways in which diverse media are used to generate sensorial access to a scriptural past” (97). Section III,

“Choreographed Experience” (Chapters 11–20), sub-divided into “Circulation” (Chapters 11–13), “Design” (Chapters 14–17), and “Classification” (Chapters 18–20), searches through “the ways in which physical engagements with materializing the Bible are oriented and engineered” (119).

The book weaves together several interconnected key themes. Firstly, the environments invite visitors to engage on multiple levels: devotional, educational, and entertainment. Secondly, these spaces offer a unique route to a shared experience of the biblical past. Through bodily movement and sensory perception—what Bielo terms “sensory indexicality” (74)—visitors connect directly with the biblical world. Thirdly, it is important to recognize that the materialisation of the Bible within these environments is never neutral. These materialisations inevitably carry theological weight, shaping and reflecting specific interpretations of Christianity to serve particular ideological agendas: “To materialize the Bible is to perform a particular theology, and the actual materiality of things always works to limit and enable how performances unfold” (65).

A few striking examples may serve to illuminate Bielo’s rich ethnographic work. In Chapter 4, entitled “Imagineering”, the Ark Encounter Christian theme park in Kentucky (constructed at the cost of US\$92 million) provides a good example of the integration of creationist theology, popular entertainment culture, and a choreographed environment, framing an embodied progression through salvation history. Chapter 6, entitled “Ways of Remaining”, provides two poignant examples of the fragile tension between fixity and contingency. One of them is Bill and Gail Warren’s divinely inspired “Bible Walk”, constructed on the Allegheny Plateau in Pennsylvania in the 1970s. Strewn with 105 fiberglass figures in biblical dress, the project quickly lapsed into desuetude following local opposition and administrative shortcomings, today remaining only as a name. In Chapter 10, entitled “How Stones Do Things”, Bielo contends that material objects have agency, making things happen in the world, whether a stone from the River Jordan in which Jesus was baptised on Kentucky’s hillside or a scale replica of the Garden Tomb (‘the Garden of Hope’), also located in Kentucky: “We are encountering an object that acts on us, as much as we might act on it” (115). In Chapter 19, which has the title “Rev. Ruth’s Yard Poetics”, the story of John (aka ‘Rev’) Ruth provides an example of a charismatic, unofficial, ministry expressed through a “material poetics” (211) instantiated in his life’s work, the “Drive-thru Bible Garden”. Ruth’s spiritual legitimacy or ‘ordination’ was not conferred by an ecclesiastical hierarchy but acquired through the materialising tradition of ‘yard work’, drawing together the expressive traditions of African American Christianity and of hope through oppression.

Materializing the Bible gives lie to the idea that the Bible is simply read ‘off the page’ or wholly contained in a set of ideas or discourses. How the Bible is truly understood is perhaps more authentically revealed in the various ways it is made concrete in the range of choreographed environments, some of which are considered in this book, and how those environments are engaged with and responded to by those who visit them.

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