
The Zionist Message Hidden within Antique Pictures of the Holy Land

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A 110-year-old trove of pictures taken by the Christian photographers of the American Colony in Jerusalem provides dramatic proof of thriving Jewish communities in Palestine. Hundreds of pictures show the ancient Jewish community of Jerusalem's Old City and the Jewish pioneers and builders of new towns and settlements in the Galilee and along the Mediterranean coastline. The American Colony photographers recorded Jewish holy sites, holiday scenes and customs, and they had a special reason for focusing their lenses on Yemenite Jews.

The collection, housed in the U.S. Library of Congress, also contains photographs from the 1860s, the first years of photography. These photographs provide a window rarely opened by historians—for several unfortunate reasons—to view the life of the Jews in the Holy Land. The photographs' display and online publication effectively counters the biased narrative claiming that the Jewish state violently emerged ex novo in the mid-twentieth century.

The claim that Israel was founded in 1948 as the world's response to the Holocaust is a common misperception and propaganda refrain. It is a matter of verifiable historical fact that this claim is lacking in merit.

"Americans and Europeans exported the conflict created by Hitler to our land," said Essam El-Erian, a senior member of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood in 2011. "Why do the Palestinians pay the price of Nazis?"¹

President Barack Obama reinforced this misperception in his well-meaning but misplaced reference to Jewish history in his June 4, 2009, Cairo speech, "[T]he aspiration for a Jewish homeland is rooted in a tragic history that cannot be denied. Around the world, the Jewish people were persecuted for centuries, and anti-Semitism in Europe culminated in an unprecedented Holocaust..."

The president then presented an "evenhanded" equivalent: "On the other hand, it is also undeniable that the Palestinian people—Muslims and Christians—have

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suffered in pursuit of a homeland. For more than sixty years they have endured the pain of dislocation....”²

These statements are basically inaccurate mainly because they fail to recognize the continuous historical presence of Jews in the Holy Land dating from ancient times. Over the centuries, and following the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE, the center of Jewish life moved to the Galilee where the great Jewish legal tomes, the Mishnah and the Talmud, were written and where Kabbalist rabbis established schools during the Middle Ages. The holy city of Jerusalem and the Western Wall have always been the destination for Jewish pilgrims and the direction for Jewish prayers.

From the mid-nineteenth century onward, photographers using a new technology chronicled the Jewish devotion to the Land of Israel and to Jerusalem. Steamships opened the Middle East to travelers, explorers, missionaries, and to photographic pioneers such as Felix Bonfils, Francis Frith, James Graham, Elijah Meyers, Peter Bergheim, and Frank Good. Many of their photographs can now be found in the Library of Congress’s digital archives online, including several of the Western Wall in the 1860s, which were scanned and posted online at this writer’s request. Other ancient photographs can be viewed online at the New York Public Library and Harvard University Museum sites.

The nineteenth-century photographers photographed Jews and the biblical sacred sites in the Holy Land, and many of their subjects were posed photographic setups. Some of the photographers may have even used models dressed as Bedouins, pious Jews, and Eastern priests. These pioneer photographers were by no means “shooters,” snapping away endlessly. Their cameras were large and bulky, their images were recorded on glass plates, and the development process required various chemicals and emulsions. Some photographers regarded themselves as portrait artists. Others were documentary and commercial photographers looking to sell well-composed and religious souvenirs to pilgrims and tourists.

The Jews of Jerusalem and the Holy Land appeared in casual, unposed photos as well, evidenced in the 1890s photo of the Jaffa Gate, for example. The shop closest to the gate is a Jewish millinery store with Jews inside and outside.

TESTIMONIES OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY IN JERUSALEM

Travelogues written in the 1860s and 1870s, such as Mark Twain’s *The Innocents Abroad*,⁵ describe the presence of Jewish communities throughout Palestine. British officer Charles Wilson led the *Ordnance Survey* of Jerusalem in 1865 and reported in his travelogue:⁶ “It is difficult to obtain statistical information on Jerusalem, but one fact alone will show the unhealthy nature of the city: The Jewish



Jewish millinery store at Jaffa Gate (circa 1895) and enlargement.³



“Wailing Place of the Jews, Solomon’s Wall,” Jerusalem. The Frenchman Felix Bonfils was the photographer and the picture can be dated to 1865. The subjects were almost certainly posed.⁴

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population is estimated at about 9,000, yet in twelve months, more than 13,000 cases of sickness were attended to in their own hospital and that of the Protestant Mission.” His *Survey* was replete with photos of Jerusalem’s holy sites, including the Western Wall.

According to one traveler William Seward, who served as the American Secretary of State under President Abraham Lincoln and visited Jerusalem in 1871, the Jews constituted half of Jerusalem’s population of sixteen thousand, the Muslims one-quarter, and the Christians and Armenians the rest.⁷



“Exterior of Haram-Ash-Sharif, Wailing Place of the Jews” by Peter Bergheim (1865). The newly available photo allows us to explore details usually not seen before, such as the Hebrew memorial notices written on the Wall. Bergheim established a photographic studio in the Christian Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem. A converted Jew, he was well aware of Jerusalem’s holy sites.⁸

The bulk of the Library of Congress’s photographs from Palestine—some twenty-two thousand—were taken by the American Colony Photographic Department over the course of fifty years, from the 1890s until 1946. The “American Colony” was a group of Christian millennialist utopians who arrived in Jerusalem in 1881. The leader of the group, Horatio Spafford, believed that “the return of the Jewish people to Jerusalem was a sign of the imminent second coming of Jesus,” according to the Library of Congress curator of a recent exhibit.⁹ As readers of the Old

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Testament, the Colony's photographers often took photographs that reflected their beliefs.

They established a communal settlement in Jerusalem's Old City, and among their enterprises were a farm, school, tourist shop, a carpentry workshop, and a photography business.

WHY WERE THESE PHOTOGRAPHS IGNORED?

The American Colony photographers "took photographs of sacred sites, such as the Mosque of Omar [often erroneously confused with the Dome of the Rock] and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre," wrote Barbara Bair in the *Jerusalem Quarterly* in 2010. No mention is made of the images of Jewish sacred sites such as the Western Wall, the synagogues of the Old City, or graves of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs.¹⁰ The *Jerusalem Quarterly* is published by the Ramallah-based Institute for Palestine Studies.¹¹

Unfortunately, contemporary historical analyses of the photographic collections often ignore the vibrant Jewish life in Palestine shown in this massive assortment of photographs. Hundreds of important photographs showing the "Old Yishuv" and the "New Yishuv" have been willfully ignored or simply forgotten. These provide visual evidence of the existence of the centuries-old pious Jewish communities, particularly in Jerusalem, and the new "Zionist" farms, factories, cooperatives, and towns throughout *Eretz Yisrael*.

In some cases, it may be that scholars and researchers are unaware of the online treasures now available through the Internet, and photographs from the mid-1850s may still be waiting to be discovered in dusty attics or in museum basements. In one amazing case, the 1859 works of the Jerusalem photographer Mendel Diness were believed to be lost until they turned up twenty years ago at a garage sale in St. Paul, Minnesota.

One year after their arrival, the leaders of the American Colony were able to put their beliefs into action. A large group of Yemenite Jews immigrated to Jerusalem, but their Jewish brethren did not welcome these exotic newcomers. Some were forced to find shelter in caves in Silwan, outside of the Old City walls.

Seeing the returning Yemenites as the lost tribe of Gad and a biblical sign, the American Colony helped to house and feed them. Over the next forty years, the Colony's photographers would take dozens of photographs of Yemenite Jews.

The Yemenite community expressed its gratitude to the American Colony community with a special prayer found in Spafford's Bible:

He who blessed our fathers Abraham, Isaac & Jacob, bless & guard & keep Horatio Spafford & his household & all that are joined with him,

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because he has shown mercy to us & our children & little ones. Therefore may the Lord make his days long...and may the Lord's mercy shelter them. In his and in our days may Judah be helped [?] and Israel rest peacefully and may the Redeemer come to Zion, Amen.¹⁴



Rachel's Tomb (ca. 1900).¹⁵

The American Colony/Library of Congress collection contains numerous pictures of Old Testament Jewish holy sites in Palestine—Rachel's Tomb outside of Bethlehem, Joseph's Tomb in Shechem (Nablus), the Patriarchs and Matriarchs Tomb in Hebron, and King David' Tomb in Jerusalem. The Colony also took dozens of pictures recreating the story of Ruth the Moabite and her spiritual and physical journey to the land of Israel and Judaism.¹⁶

Along with the Western Wall, the photographers also took many pictures of the Muslim mosques on the Temple Mount (Haram al-Sharif). But it is apparent that they also took advantage of the destruction of the Al-Aqsa Mosque in the 1927 earthquake to go under the mosque and photograph an entrance and stairway to the Jewish Temple's plaza that had been sealed centuries earlier.

The American Colony also took pictures of the interiors of Old City synagogues in Jerusalem—which the Jordanians systematically blew up in 1949.

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“The Temple area. The Double Gate. Ancient entrance to Temple beneath Al-Aqsa.” Note the staircase that apparently led to the surface and the Temple plaza.¹⁷



Ohel Yitzhak Synagogue (ca. 1900).¹⁸



The Hurva Synagogue (ca. 1935).¹⁹



The Istambouli Synagogue (ca. 1935).²⁰

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The American Colony photographers recorded pictures of Arab farmers and their relatively primitive farming methods—oxen threshing grain and animals pulling plows. But there is a more subtle message: the Old Testament scholars in the American Colony undoubtedly knew that the pictures actually document the biblical prohibitions of using mismatched animals to pull a plow or muzzling an ox threshing wheat.



“Thou shall not plow with an ox and an ass together.” Deuteronomy 20 (ca. 1900).²¹



“Thou shall not muzzle an ox in its threshing.” Deuteronomy 25 (ca. 1900).²²

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DISCOVERIES IN THE PHOTOS OF THE GERMAN EMPEROR

Although the photographers were not photojournalists in the modern sense of the term, they recorded the major stories of their day. For example, their images of the German Kaiser's visit to Palestine in 1898 were marketed as commemorative pictures and postcards. But careful scrutiny and enlargement of the American Colony collection shows that the photos provide a window into the life of Jerusalem's Jewish community.

The pictures show the Jewish population, predominantly ultra-Orthodox, lining the roads and rooftops in their Sabbath finery. At the community's elaborate arch built for the Kaiser's parade route, the chief rabbis are photographed along with Jewish ritual treasures on display, including Torah crowns and curtains taken from the synagogues' arks. By enlarging the pictures, we can read the names of three Old City synagogues on the curtains.



The Kaiser passes Jewish crowds and through the Jewish arch, bedecked with Torah crowns and curtains from the arks. (See the enlarged curtain with a dedication from the Istambouli synagogue.) Beneath the arch await the chief rabbis and other Jerusalem dignitaries (1898).²³

Within the Library of Congress archives are also the photographers' documentation of Jewish suffering at the hands of both the Turkish rulers of Palestine until 1917 and the Arabs of Palestine thereafter. They photographed the Turkish "tyrant Hassan Bey," who cruelly ruled Jaffa from 1914 to 1916. Among their pictures are the marble stones and gravestones he confiscated to build the Hassan

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Bey Mosque.²⁴ Historians suggest that the gravestones may have been stolen from Muslim as well as Jewish cemeteries.

It can be assumed that these pictures of the “tyrant Hassan Bey” were published only after the British conquered Palestine in 1917–1918. The American Colony carefully guarded their “neutral” status during World War I, giving their photographers access to both sides of the frontlines.

Additional evidence of the sympathies of the Christian photographers may be seen in the revelation in the Library of Congress narrative that accompanies the American Colony exhibit: in 1898, the “American Colony Photo Department photographers headed by a former Bombay Jew, Elijah Meyers, were hired by Zionist [leader] Theodor Herzl to document Jewish settlements.”²⁵

In 1898, Meyers accompanied his friend and fellow photographer Yesha'yahu Raffalovich on a tour of northern Palestine in order to prepare photographs of settlements for the 1899 Zionist Congress in Basel. The pictures presented here are not dated or captioned, but they appear to be the result of the Meyers-Raffalovich collaboration.



Harvesting at a Jewish colony (ca. 1898).²⁶

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DOCUMENTING JEWISH TRAGEDIES

The American Colony's photographs of the expulsion of Jews from Jerusalem's Old City in 1929 and 1936 are haunting reminders of the Arch of Titus relief of Jewish slaves after Jerusalem's fall in 70 CE.



Expulsion from the Old City in 1929.²⁷



Expulsion from the Old City in 1936.²⁸

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The American Colony archives also contain a series of photographs taken immediately after the massacre of the Jewish community of Hebron in 1929. The pictures show synagogues and homes with bloodstained floors and Torah scrolls strewn on the ground. The leaders of the present Jewish community of Hebron told this writer that they had never seen the pictures before.



The destroyed Avraham Avenu Synagogue in Hebron.²⁹

The photographers traveled to Tiberias in the late 1930s to photograph extensively at the Scottish Mission Hospital in the town. What brought them there? One of the pictures shows a “little Jewish boy patient” in his hospital room,³⁰ which may provide a hint why the American Colony photographers were there. Not well known is a massacre of Jews in Tiberias in October 1938, when Arab marauders struck a Jewish neighborhood.

A lengthy annual report of the British Mandate, 1938, included these three sentences:

On October 2nd there occurred a general raid on the Jewish quarter of Tiberias. It was systematically organized and savagely executed. Of the

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19 Jews killed, including women and children, all save four were stabbed to death.³¹

Were these pictures of the survivors? It would certainly be in character for the Christian group who longed to see Jews returning to the Holy Land.

Illustrative of the willful distortion and erasure of Jewish history in these antique pictures, the BBC recently ran this picture as part of a review of the hotel now situated in the renovated hospital. They published the falsified caption, “Patients came from as far away as Syria,” making no mention of the original text which described the “little Jewish boy patient.”³²



Little Jewish boy patient in Tiberias.

The American Colony photographers also documented the building of the Zionist state with hundreds of photos of the construction of Tel Aviv, the Haifa port, the Iraq-Haifa oil pipeline, the massive Dead Sea Works, kibbutzim, moshavim, and factories. Agricultural farms, vineyards, and wineries are well represented. Agricultural students working in various farming activities were favorite subjects of the photographers, especially when they were attractive young women.



Clearing dunes to build Tel Aviv (ca. 1920).³³

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Girl student farmer in Nahalal (ca. 1930).³⁴



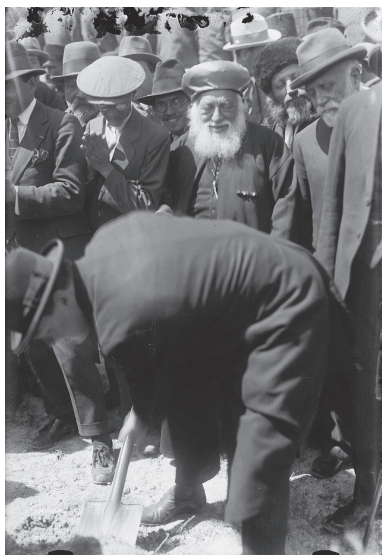
Pioneer settlers at Ein Gev on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, including Teddy Kollek (second from right), later to become mayor of Jerusalem (1937).³⁵



Diamond polishing factory (1939).³⁶

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Documenting the Zionist enterprise, the American Colony photographers preserved the images of the arrival of the first British High Commissioner Herbert Samuel and his meeting with Jewish leaders, the triumphal visit of Lord Balfour to open the Hebrew University and tour the Jewish settlements in the land, and the tree-planting ceremony of Winston Churchill on the future site of the Hebrew University on Mt. Scopus. (Churchill met with Emir Abdullah and T. E. Lawrence [“of Arabia”] on that visit to Jerusalem.)



Winston Churchill planting a tree on the future site of The Hebrew University. Behind him are the chief rabbis of Palestine (1921).³⁷



Lord Balfour dedicating The Hebrew University (1925).³⁸

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Today, the American Colony Hotel in Jerusalem has become a popular meeting place for the leadership of the Palestinian Authority, the PLO, their international supporters, and the press. It also serves as a rendezvous for Jews and Arabs.³⁹

Today's political situation, however, belies decades of the Colony's clearly documented sympathy for and photographic activism on behalf of the Jews of Eretz Yisrael. In 2007, Valentine Vester, a descendant of the American Colony founders, wrote an introduction to *The American Colony Family Album*, a collection of photographs from the hotel's archives. She referred to the passage of the Colony's leadership from founder Anna Spafford to her daughter Bertha Vester:

Bertha was extremely politically aware. The rise of Zionism and the increased immigration of Jews did not represent to her the Ingathering of the Exiles and coming of the Kingdom [of God], but increased hardships for Palestine's Arab population.⁴⁰

CONCLUSION

The thousands of photographs of *Eretz Yisrael* in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries provide a visual history of Jewish life in the Holy Land in an era before Israel's founding. These valuable visual resources have been underutilized by researchers around the world, especially today when many of the collections are digitalized online. The pictures must be searched out in museums and libraries, and photos should be identified and dated.

One unidentified and undated photo from the Library of Congress archives remarkably illustrates the need. The caption originally read "Jewish children's procession." No date, location, or explanation was provided.⁴¹ Research and on-site visits showed that the hundreds of children from Jewish schools were walking on Nablus Road in Jerusalem on April 30, 1918, heading south toward the Old City where most of them lived. The occasion was the Jewish holiday Lag B'Omer, the thirty-third day between the Passover and Shavuot holidays, when schools even today take outings. The children were returning from the ancient grave of Simon the Just, a longtime Jerusalem custom on the day. A British army camp on the left horizon suggests that the year was 1918, just months after the British captured Jerusalem. The Library of Congress has updated the caption citing this author's research.

Why have these pictures not been given a broader public showing? Perhaps because only recently museums have digitalized these images and placed them on line. Perhaps because Jewish researchers failed to get beyond the large concentration of Christian sites in the early pictures. And perhaps some were reluctant to



wade through photographs associated with the American Colony, an establishment viewed by some today as unfriendly to Israel.

The ongoing delegitimization campaign against Israel, the Jewish state, takes many forms—militarily, diplomatically, and through the media. If the Holocaust can be denied by anti-Semites, the history of the Jewish people and their bond with Eretz Yisrael can also be denied by Israel's enemies. For example, Yasir Arafat declared at the Camp David talks that no Jewish Temple had ever existed in Jerusalem. Likewise, Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, on September 25, 2012, addressing the UN General Assembly in New York, told reporters that the "Zionist state" had "no roots" in the Middle East and would be "eliminated."⁴²

In today's media environment of quick sound bites, brief news cycles, and 140-letter Tweets, presenting Israel's history and beating back attempts at delegitimization can be well served by presenting the treasure trove of century-old photos such as those of the American Colony. This is the purpose of the website www.israel-dailypicture.com, which this author created to present such visual documentation along with a short narrative.

The purpose of this article has been to demonstrate that photographic images (can and should) be used as a primary historical source.

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NOTES

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2. Barack Obama, speech in Cairo, "A New Beginning," June 4, 2009, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/NewBeginning/transcripts>.
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9. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC, <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/americancolony/amcolony-jerusalem.html>.
10. Queried by this writer, Prof. Bair responded:
There are many things I would like to have included in [the article] if it was a longer kind of publication. The intended focus, however, was very elementary and introductory, i.e., the intent was to give various photographers involved in the American Colony Photo Department recognition.... I hope in the future to publish further work focusing more on Zionist issues and Jewish heritage content, particularly in the Mandate period, as there is much beautiful material and it is a very interesting subject.
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