

A New Art in an Ancient Land: Palestine through the lens of early European photographers

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Of all the lands there are for dismal scenery, I think Palestine must be the prince. The hills are barren, they are dull of color, they are unpicturesque in shape. The valleys are unsightly deserts fringed with a feeble vegetation that has an expression about it of being sorrowful and despondent. The Dead Sea and the Sea of Galilee sleep in the midst of a vast stretch of hill and plain wherein the eye rests upon no pleasant tint, no striking object, no soft picture dreaming in a purple haze or mottled with the shadows of the clouds. Every outline is harsh, every feature is distinct, there is no perspective - distance works no enchantment here. It is a hopeless, dreary, heart-broken land. . . . Palestine is desolate and unlovely. And why should it be otherwise? Can the curse of the Deity beautify a land? Palestine is no more of this work-day world. It is sacred to poetry and tradition – it is dream-land.

Mark Twain in *The Innocents Abroad*¹

Of all narrative accounts about Palestine written by Western travellers in the nineteenth century, the harsh words of American writer Mark Twain strike even the most disenchanted reader. Except for its spiritual dimension, Palestine appeared to him as a dull and characterless place, miles away from the magnificent sights he found in Damascus or Giza. Other visitors to the region, who felt quite disappointed by the evident decay of the Ottoman province of Palestine, shared Twain's view. Their memories are consistent in describing a place of poverty and backwardness, as if it had been frozen, or dismissed from history, after having accomplished its mission of

giving birth to Jesus – almost a “curse,” as Twain puts it. Many of the early Western travellers to Palestine did not hesitate to trust their first impressions of the land, which were recorded in their diaries and journals.

At the same time, as Rosovsky points out, visual artists followed a very different approach:

Just like painters, photographers selected and “edited” the scenes they captured. The brush and lens portrayed things differently from the pen because writers could describe both the good and the bad in one book, while painters and photographers had but one shot at a scene, and depictions of dirt, poverty, or misery did not sell.²

Thus, a discrepancy emerges between the narrative and the visual accounts of the same subject: while literature might be expected to have a natural bent for imaginative departures from reality, in this context it turned out to be very focused on the present day and interested in the current conditions of the natural and social environment. On the other hand, while photography was acclaimed as an extraordinary tool for depicting reality as accurately as ever thanks to the precision of science and technology, in Palestine it often turned away from contemporary subjects in order to search for evidence of a *timeless past* of biblical memory.

In the nineteenth century Palestine was indeed a neglected province of the Ottoman Empire, but since Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt in 1798 and his subsequent campaign along the Palestinian cities of the coast – Gaza, Jaffa, Haifa and Acre – the Holy Land attracted more and more interest in the West. Because of its paramount significance for Christianity, but also for its crucial position on the route to Syria and India, Palestine became the target of several ventures, mainly led by French and British explorers. Inspired by a wave of enthusiasm for the exotic and the sacred – both abundant in the Holy Land – many pioneer photographers crossed the Mediterranean Sea to capture images that the European public was eager to see.

The first photographers heading eastwards to Palestine were Frenchmen Frédéric Goupil-Fesquet, Horace Vernet, Girault de Parangey and Swiss-born Canadian Pierre Joly de Lotbinière. The year 1839, writes Howe, saw “Goupil-Fesquet anxiously peering at the silvered plate in his mercury vapor development chamber, hoping to see a miniature of Jerusalem appear. Goupil-Fesquet photographed Jerusalem between 11 and 14 December 1839, a scant three months after Daguerre’s process was demonstrated in Paris.”³

From a technical point of view, daguerreotypes presented two main limitations: even if quite sharp and detailed, the positive image on the silver plates could not be reproduced; moreover, the process required an exposure time of several minutes, which ruled out any chance of taking spontaneous pictures of people. This constraint may help to explain why the production of the first photographers was almost entirely dedicated to landscapes and architecture. Many of these early works were included in the album *Excursions Daguerriennes: vues et monuments les plus remarquables*

du globe (1840-1843), published in instalments by Parisian daguerreotypist Noël Paymal Lerebours. Original daguerreotypes were copied by artists and printed as engravings.

In the early age of photography, George Keith is believed to be the only British maker of daguerreotypes in the Middle East: he travelled to Palestine with his father Alexander, a clergyman, and he produced a body of work to describe the sites of the Bible with the aim of providing evidence of the prophecies. A number of engravings copied from his daguerreotypes were published in his father's book *Evidence of the Truth of the Christian Religion*,⁴ which met with great success and was reissued in several editions.

These two pioneer publications – *Excursions Daguerriennes* and *Evidence of the Truth of the Christian Religion* – may well represent the different perspectives of the first European photographers in Palestine. As W. Stapp points out, “French images, even of biblical subjects, tended to be devoid of religious motives; whereas the work of both British and American photographers often had religious implications.”⁵ However, the technical difficulties in reproducing the pictures fixed on daguerreotypes made it hard for these images to achieve a wide-reaching impact on the European public. Such difficulties were overcome after William Henry Fox Talbot successfully experimented with the calotype technique in 1841 and, ten years later, after Frederick Scott Archer introduced the collodion process. Thanks to these major advancements the practice of photography greatly expanded its potential: any number of images could be developed from negative glasses, while exposure timing substantially dropped. In the second half of the 1840s, British cleric George Bridges and French architect Pierre Trémaux were the first travellers to the Near East who made calotypes along their journeys, but their modest technical skills prevented their efforts from being preserved in remarkable and long lasting works.

Among the authors who left substantial traces in the early history of Middle East photography is Maxime Du Camp, who travelled throughout Egypt and Palestine in 1849-50, together with French novelist Gustave Flaubert. “Like many youths of his generation” writes Ballerini



Joseph Pholbert Girault de Parangey (1844), *Jérusalem, G.[ran]de Mosquée*. Daguerreotype.



George Skene Keith (1844), *View of Samaria*. Engraving copied from daguerreotype.

Du Camp was swept by a wave of Orientalism focused on Egypt in particular as the site of an extinct culture often described as the cradle of Western civilization. It was upon the realization of his dream of going to Egypt that Du Camp took up photography, but not as a means of personal expression. For him the camera was “an instrument of precision ... which would allow me exact reconstructions.”⁶

The intent of documenting as accurately as possible the environment around him did not inspire the French photographer to take particularly original views: his main subject is always in the center of the frame, and observed from a distance. Although the overall effect might appear “straightforward and banal,” as Ballerini candidly remarks, Du Camp’s work remains a valuable legacy of the places where he set his camera and dark room. In 1852 his images were collected and widely distributed in the first travel album of its kind: *Egypt, Nubie, Palestine et Syrie*, 1852, published in Lille by Blanquart-Evrard.

On occasions, especially when bewildered by the size of Egyptian monuments, Du Camp included a local person in the frame so as to provide a scale of comparison to the viewer. The presence of people, in such instances, remains purely functional: to better illustrate the grandeur of ancient civilizations. These photographers are not interested in exploring the contemporary way of life of remote areas of the Middle East, but rather in searching for the roots of mankind and Christianity. In fact, like their French colleagues and competitors, British photographers also refrained from turning their attention to people. As Rosen notes, “Winners, as we know, write history and since the introduction of the daguerreotype in 1839, they have been photographing it as well.”⁷ In other words, there is no space for “losers” or, simply, for ordinary people. This kind of humanistic, social interest would not emerge until the end of the nineteenth century, before developing in full at a later stage.

Chesterfield-born Francis Frith claims a prominent place in the gallery of early photographers of the Middle East, having produced an impressive archive of images in the course of three expeditions to the region between 1856 and 1860. Well aware of the increasing demand for Holy Land pictures in the Victorian market, Frith embarked for Egypt and Palestine confident of producing plenty of materials with his three cameras. As a matter of fact, all of his travels turned out very successfully so that in 1859 he managed to establish his own photography printing and publishing firm, in Reigate. Keen on innovation, Frith presented his work to the public in a variety of formats, including stereocards. In 1862-63 some of his Palestine views were chosen to illustrate the Queen Victoria Bible, further strengthening the link between religious interest and commercial success.

Even if local people sometimes do appear in Frith’s images, as in this Bethlehem view, they look like indistinct characters placed in a still landscape, thus reinforcing the perception that biblical times are still alive in the Holy Land. This photograph aims at fulfilling the public expectation of finding semi-rural landscapes in the neighbourhood of the eternal Nativity scene. In this sense, they do not inform the

viewer of a living reality with its own features and dynamics; rather, they seek to confirm a pre-constructed vision. Such photographs primarily serve the purpose of showing what the Holy Land is assumed to be like, rather than of expanding knowledge of what is really unknown. After all, this is what sells, this is what the market demands, and this is what the supply of photographs aims at fulfilling: it is a fact that has remained true well beyond Frith's days, as Edward Said points out in his analysis of Orientalism. Unlike a travelling writer like Mark Twain, an early photographer like Francis Frith is first and foremost an entrepreneur. For him, and for several of his contemporary colleagues, the brand new art of photography is the key to an entirely new range of fascinating products, rather than to a deeper understanding of reality. One might perhaps wonder if photography, at this early stage, could really afford the straightforward, brutal frankness of some sophisticated forms of literary explorations. Newborn photography had to grow up one step at a time, spending its first energies to attract its audience through imaginary visions, possibly enriched with supernatural charm, possibly like the lost earliest versions of oral literature that existed long before the invention of writing. People ask to be entertained, or moved, or excited, or impressed, while reality is often disappointing, or complicated, or disturbing, or trivial. Photography was not yet ready to disappoint basic expectations; it had to meet them, before overcoming them. Most probably, this is why Palestine was chosen as the destination of the very first photography



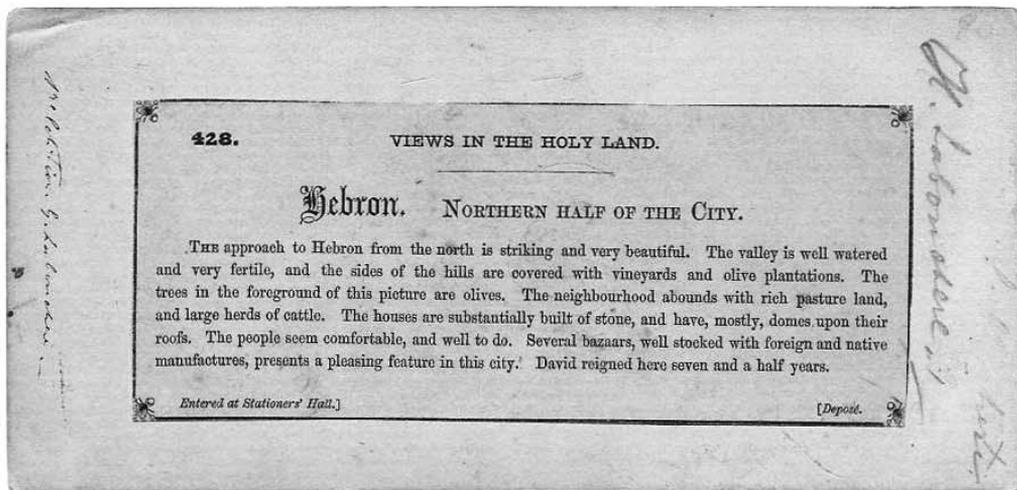
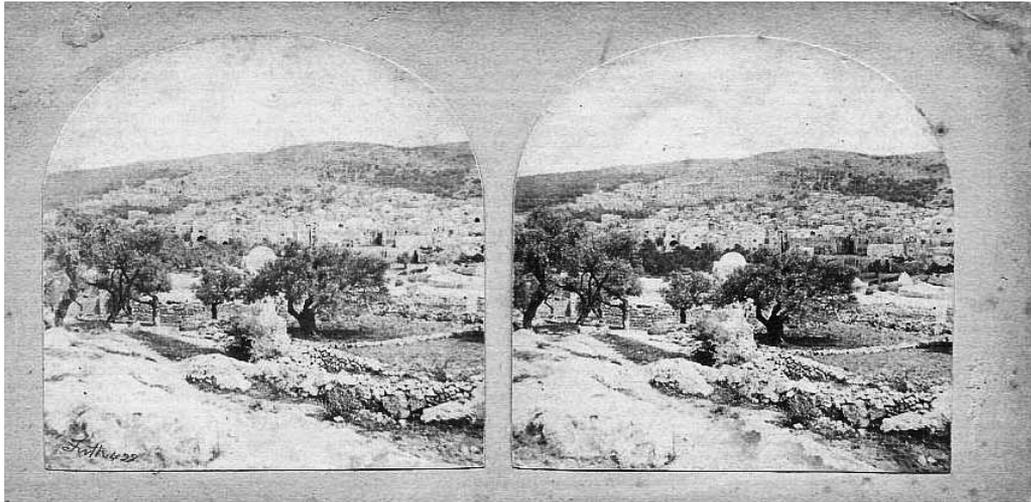
Maxime Du Camp (1852), *Palestine: Jérusalem: partie occidentale des murailles*. Salted paper print.



Maxime Du Camp *Abu Simbel: Westernmost Colossus of the Temple of Re*.



Francis Frith (1862), *Street view with the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem*



Francis Frith (1858-1859), *Hebron. Northern half of the city*. Stereocard.

ventures outside Europe: it was more than a place, it was the earthly cradle of the Divine, somewhat similar to Mount Olympus. There, the revolutionary art of photography could find the appropriate setting for its baptism in the field, evoking supernatural awe, without much interference from reality.

The company established by Frith developed quite rapidly, expanding its archive with the works of other talented photographers like Francis Bedford, who was commissioned to accompany the Prince of Wales on a trip to Egypt and the Holy Land in 1862. Most of the photographs taken in Palestine in the Victorian era look very much alike, with their empty landscapes and timeless pieces of architecture. That is why one particular picture taken by Bedford stands out: it is the portrait of the royal entourage resting under a fig tree by the spring Ain-et-Tin, in Galilee. Dressed in

their relatively informal travel attire, the figures appear relaxed in the shade of the tree as they prepare for a frugal meal laid on the ground. Even if the men look fairly serious and intense before the eye of the camera, their presence brings a welcome vitality to the scene, pushing for a moment the *transcendent past* aside for the sake of the *earthly present*, here and now. The peculiarity of this image is noted by Wheatley-Irving: “This rather unflattering portrait of the Prince of Wales and his entourage . . . was produced and circulated at a time when individuals who wanted to publicize their travels to the Middle East would typically have themselves depicted in studio portraits attired in Middle Eastern clothing.”⁸

Among those who found some respite in Palestine after having photographed the Crimean War were Felice Beato, his brother Antonio, and their brother-in-law James Robertson. Beato arrived in Jerusalem in March 1857 and remained for about two years, working in partnership with Robertson before embarking for India and the Far East. Beato’s time in Palestine can be considered a peaceful interlude in a life full of war experiences throughout Asia, as he later accompanied military forces in China, Japan, Korea and Burma. In fact, his materials from Palestine appear quite standardized, though he went to places off the traditional routes followed by Western pilgrims.

Other remarkable photographers documented the land of Palestine during this period, including Auguste Salzmann, whose work is distinguished by specific attention to detail, and James MacDonald, a sergeant in the Royal



Francis Frith (1858-1859), *Bethlehem, with the Church of the Nativity.*



Francis Bedford (1862), *Group at Ain-et-Tin.*



Robertson & Beato (1857). *Convent of Mar Saba, Judean Desert.*



Auguste Salzmann (1856). *Jérusalem: Saint Sépulcre: abside.*



Auguste Salzmann (1856). *Saint Sépulcre: détails des chapiteaux*



Auguste Salzmann (1856). *Enceinte du Temple.*

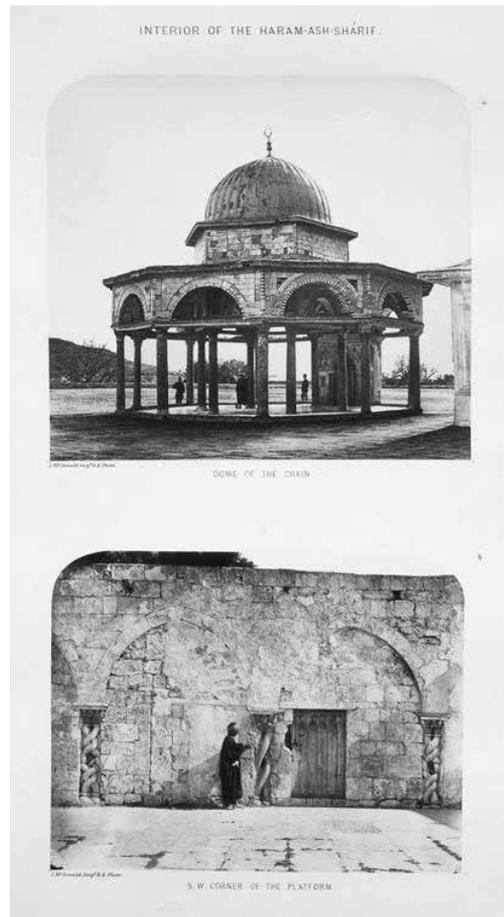
Engineers who was involved in the Ordnance Survey of Jerusalem.

Salzmann's pictures of Jerusalem, amongst others, are accompanied by captions making direct reference to biblical sites even when the subject had dramatically changed along the centuries. The most striking example is the Dome of the Rock. The Muslim shrine stands in all its splendor in the center of the frame, but it is totally neglected in the caption, which reads "The site of [Solomon's] Temple".

Palestinian scholar Issam Nassar comments that "it is ironic that European photographers were able to see what had existed two thousand years before on that site and ignore what was there before their own eyes; perhaps such 'blindness' simply resulted from the market demand in Europe for Holy Land photographs . . . This 'amazing ability to discover the land without discovering the people,' to use the words of Beshara Doumani, may very well have paved the way for the emergence of the popular mythical image of Palestine as a land without people, which became a slogan of the Zionist movement half a century later."⁹

McDonald's pictures are worthy of note because they allow some local people to be part of the environment, which is not necessarily purged of its contemporary content in order to be fed into the collective, imaginary vision of the Holy Land. Bystanders still perform a subsidiary function with respect to the main subject, but it is evident that their presence adds intensity and character to the images. This kind of sensitivity appears particularly appropriate in a military officer engaged in an institutional project like the Royal Survey.

A major step forward in documentary photography was made by French photographer Félix Bonfils who, in 1867, established a studio in Beirut together with his wife Marie-Lydie and son Adrien. Bonfils' production throughout the Middle East is deservedly regarded as an outstanding body of work. In 1872 American publisher Taber & Co. released the first catalogue of his images, while four years later Bonfils himself published a selection of his best material, which became available in Paris, London, Egypt and Damascus. The peculiarity of Bonfils' work stems from the fact that he was not an occasional traveller to the Near East like his previous colleagues, but had actually settled there and developed an intense relationship with the contemporary local context. The photographer was not driven by archeological interest alone, but was also inspired by an anthropological curiosity about the Arab and Ottoman cultures around him. Next to traditional landscapes, in fact, his catalogues included a substantial number of portraits of local people who were classified as "types" representing the members of local communities. One of the main contributions of Bonfils' work is bringing to public awareness the fact that the Near East was not simply made of ancient stones, but of *living stones* as well. Regrettably, the captions of Bonfils' pictures were not always recorded consistently in the catalogues, so that it is difficult to identify the year and place where images were taken. His early work on Palestine can be placed between the mid-1870s and the end of the 1880s. Bonfils' production includes studio portraits as well as extremely dynamic street photography.



Mc Donald, J. (1865). *Interior of the Haram-ash-Sharif*.

When focusing on biblical sites, Bonfils often captured them with an awareness that he was seeing them at a specific point in time, *his own time*, and local people are the primary expressions of that time. Thus, Bonfils' work goes far beyond the purpose of providing visual evidence to biblical references, bringing the viewer much closer to reality.

In other instances, though, Bonfils resorted to staging pictures to illustrate biblical scenes. "A card with the caption 'Field of Boaz,' pointing to the Old Testament parable from the Book of



Félix Bonfils (1875). a. *Rabbin juif à Jérusalem*; b. *Derviches mendiants à Jérusalem*.



Félix Bonfils (188?), *Palestine*. *Mur où les juifs vont pleurer*.



Félix Bonfils, *Field of Boaz*. Postcard.

Ruth, where Boaz, a rich and prominent man from Bethlehem meets the poor and widowed Moabitess Ruth harvesting on his land, has people posing as Ruth and Boaz with figures in the background lined up so as to visualize this parable.¹⁰ Making the theatrical setup of the scene so evident, Bonfils avoids misunderstandings: his documentary work should not be mixed with imagery produced for the purpose of religious remembrance, thus preserving the integrity of the former.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that Bonfils' archive includes some portraits of Arab women, quite an unusual subject in the early days of photography. "It is thought that Lydie herself [Bonfils' wife] took several photographs especially for the costumes series featuring women – Oriental women being more inclined to pose if the operator were a woman herself."¹¹

Bonfils' genuine interest in real life pushes him beyond the boundaries of the unnatural perfection of his studio to make photographs of local women in the street in their most ordinary attire. This is an experiment in documentary photography in its purest form, one that looks at people for who they are, rather than for the imaginary roles they could involuntarily play in a wider, pre-constructed vision.

Let us consider these ladies coming from the pool of Siloe, south of the Old City of Jerusalem. A connection is established between the photographer and the women. The setting is rough, as is their outfit: simple clothes, bare feet on barren earth. Clearly, they did not ask for this photograph to be taken. Outside the studio, it is inevitably the photographer's choice. Nevertheless, the two ladies pose, after being asked. Which means being noticed, in the first place, and being respected, in the second. Most probably, they have also been asked to stand still because of the low shutter speed, but there is no need: they cannot avoid feeling a bit tense, holding themselves slightly rigid in front of the eye of the camera. Still, they are fully aware of their picture being made, and they accept it, with the simple gesture of covering their faces with a corner of their *hijab*. They know that this picture will remain as a proof of their existence, a trace of their own lives. This picture is also a document of their relevance in the local community. Bonfils demonstrates extraordinary maturity in focusing his attention on these ladies, in realizing how they deserve to be memorialized in a photograph. Often marginalized in a male-dominated society, here they



Bonfils Photography Studio. *Syrian Woman with scarf.*



Félix Bonfils. Palestine. *Femmes de Siloé*, ca.1870.

stand in the middle of the frame. This picture is for them. Bonfils seems to be more interested in exploring reality than in supporting assumptions, and this is what makes his work of outstanding documentary value.

According to one commentator,

the Bonfils repertoire may be the most useful of all Near Eastern photographers. There are basically four reasons for this. First, Bonfils prints were meticulously processed. . . . Second, their subjects were selected in a consciously encyclopedic spirit. A vast range of geographical, ethnographic, Biblical, archaeological, architectural and historic data has thus been preserved. Third, their work spanned the period when most profound changes were occurring in the region. And, fourth, in contrast to those who attempted to portray the most romantic or exotic aspects of the local population, the Bonfils were interested in capturing the daily life of residents.¹²

Since its early days, the photographic exploration of Palestine has produced an invaluable stock of information, besides offering great experiences to those who reached the Near East, be it for commercial interests, religious faith, archeological passion, political drive, or mere curiosity about a distant place. Whatever the reason for sailing to the Levant, the encounter of the first European photographers with the land of Palestine proved to be much richer than Twain's experience. The heritage of Palestine revealed to them so many layers of meanings that its ownership would come to be contested for generations to come, in a conflict yet to be resolved.

Conclusion

Soon after the introduction of photography, the Middle East became a compelling destination for the first European explorers equipped with cameras, coming from France and Britain. Most of them, though, were in search of visual evidence to support Western assumptions about how the Holy Land should look, preferring to see it unchanged since the days of the Nativity. Early photographs of Palestinian landscapes appear empty and devoid of human activity as if the land, after fulfilling its call to provide the stage for the Gospels, had fallen into silent idleness, exhausted. Indeed, the decaying Ottoman Empire had contributed to hinder the pace of development of Palestinian cities, so that the search for rural places reminiscent of biblical settings did not require an extraordinary amount of imagination. In other words, the Palestinian context encouraged foreign visitors to see what they expected to see, what they already had in mind, what they ultimately *wanted* to see, together with their public. Cameras were often deliberately used as a means to confirm assumptions, rather than to assess reality as it manifested itself. Hence the first, selective visual accounts of Palestine contributed to the spread in Europe of deep misconceptions regarding the social and cultural context on the ground. Uninterested in the apparent dullness of the

present, many early photographers approached the Middle East like archeologists, rather than anthropologists. Or, more precisely, like souvenir-makers for European customers. Their production could not but reflect this approach, which found fertile ground among different circles of people who, if naïve, were happy buying images of the Holy Land as if it had been preserved in a vacuum since the time of Christ. Certain less naïve groups were interested in establishing the perception of “a land without people for a people without land.” Notable exceptions emerged, like Félix Bonfils, who was aware that Palestine and the Middle East were more complex settings than an open-air museum. After all, he did not simply visit the Near East: he settled there. But the images where he expressed his social awareness and human concern for the *living stones* of the Middle East did not match the expectations of those who were looking for biblical evocations in empty spaces, and who were determined to fill that alleged emptiness their own way.

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