

The Missing Piece:

Reconstructing Narrative in Museums in the West Bank

Introduction

The application of the Israeli “Museums Law” as a military order made it possible for the Ministry of Culture to allocate funds to museums in the West Bank. This document seeks to examine how the application of the law as a military order in 2012 encouraged the advancement of archaeological museums in the West Bank, and will focus on two case studies: the **Good Samaritan Museum**, and the **Eretz Yehuda Museum** (Land of Judea Museum) in Hebron.

The Good Samaritan Museum is situated between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea, and is part of a long-term national project to showcase mosaics from the West Bank. This museum has been supported from an early stage by the State of Israel, while the Eretz Yehuda Museum in Kiryat Arba began as a private small-scale enterprise. In recent years, the Eretz Yehuda Museum has been the focus of a number of extensive development plans near the settlement of Kiryat Arba. An examination of these two archaeological museums demonstrates the role of the State in supporting the settlers’ efforts to promote the idea of Jewish belonging to the West Bank, while underplaying the historical connection between the Palestinians and the land.

The Museums Law

In 1984, the Knesset passed the Museums Law, which stipulated the conditions under which the Minister of Culture may recognize museums as cultural institutions entitled to state budgets.¹ Like all Israeli laws, this law also had no validity in the West Bank, so long as it was not adopted by the IDF Central Command as a binding order. Despite heavy pressure exerted by various political parties on the GOC Central Command for 30 years since the law's enactment, the

¹ The Israel Museum Law (1983) ([Heb](#))

commanding officers refrained from signing an order to apply the Israeli Museums Law to the Occupied Territories.²

In 2012, MK Uri Ariel initiated a change in the Museums Law, to make it applicable to the West Bank. Although this procedure was meaningless without consent by the Central Command to adopt the law, Uriel received support by Members of Knesset and the government, specifically then-Minister of Culture Limor Livnat. In contrast to previous attempts to apply the law, this time GOC Central Command Avi Mizrahi signed the decree to apply the Museums Law to the West Bank. Following the adoption of the order, Livnat withdrew the proposed law from the Knesset table, emphasizing that the purpose of the procedure she initiated was to exert pressure on the Central Command.³ The adoption of the law paved the way for state-funded museums in the West Bank.

The Good Samaritan Museum



Figure 5: The Good Samaritan Museum

² For more information see <https://www.thelawfilm.com/inside/hebrew/stories/museums-law>

³ *ibid*

The Good Samaritan Museum is located in Mishor Adumim. The site has been associated with the New Testament story of the Good Samaritan, since the fourth century. The story tells of a man who was assaulted on his return to Jericho from the Temple in Jerusalem and remained wounded on the roadside, until he was treated by a Samaritan passerby who bandaged his wounds and provided him with food and lodgings without compensation. This story is significant in Western culture, and many Western countries have enacted laws that require their citizens to act in its spirit.

The Good Samaritan site is located along Route 1, between Jerusalem to Jericho. A church dating to the Byzantine period (sixth century CE) and a building that was used as a khan (wayside inn) in the Ottoman period were discovered at the site. In 2009 a museum was established in the area under the management of the Israel Nature and Parks Authority, and has been the recipient of extensive government support. The museum exhibits mosaics uncovered in various sites throughout Judea and Samaria. The preservation and restoration of the mosaics began in the early 2000s, and including the construction of the museum the total cost of investment came to 10 million NIS. Part of this investment came from the Ministry of Tourism, a violation of international law which only permits investment by the Civil Administration.⁴ As the audio guide at the entrance to the museum explains, the mosaics on display are associated with the three faiths mentioned in the Good Samaritan story, originating from Jewish and Samaritan synagogues, and Christian churches. The museum is divided into three exhibition areas. The first actually displays a mosaic floor from a synagogue in Gaza, not the West Bank (Fig. 6).

⁴ [The Museum of the Good Samaritan opens to the public \(6/7/09\)](#), Israel Antiquities Authority website. Retrieved September 2, 2017.



Figure 6: The mosaic from Gaza at the entrance to the museum

The second exhibition area is located in the khan structure discovered at the site. The khan is divided into six rooms, each of which features artifacts associated with the three faiths. One room is dedicated to mosaics unearthed in Jewish synagogues; two additional rooms display mosaics excavated in Samaritan synagogues; and the remaining three contain mosaics discovered in churches. The last display area is located in the Byzantine church discovered at the site itself (Fig. 7), where the church's floor was preserved as part of general restoration works, which also included the construction of a roof and benches for the purpose of performing mass and prayers.



Figure 7: The Byzantine church

In addition to the mosaics, the museum also features an observation point (fig. 8) and a film about the history of the site. The film is screened inside a hewn cave that served as a dwelling dated to the Second Temple period (first century BCE to the first century CE).

In addition to the film, an audio guide is also on offer. The guide focuses, among other things, on the technique of creating mosaics and the cultural and historical contexts in which they were created. These explanations are professional and relevant. The film, on the other hand, tells a fictional story of a group of contemporary religious Jewish-Israeli girls who visit the site and meet the Jew who was beaten and exploited by the thieves in the Good Samaritan story. The Jew tells the girls his version of the story, emphasizing that this site is built along the route of the Jewish pilgrims to the Temple in Jerusalem. The message in the video is the enduring connection of the Jewish people to Jerusalem and the Temple Mount, a connection that has persisted from the Second Temple to the present day. The appearance of the ancient Jew in the setting of modern-day Israel and the mention of a mosaic with a Hebrew inscription which is on display in the museum make it obvious that the intention is to place the story of Jewish belonging at the

center of the visitors' experience. However, in comparison to the film, the audio guide conveys a political message which, in our opinion, is even more problematic.



Figure 8: The view from the lookout point. Jerusalem is visible on the horizon

The explanations offered for the various mosaics by the audio guide indicate the names of the sites where they were first exposed, but provide little information about the location of the sites, their history or the circumstances that led to their discovery and transfer to the Good Samaritan Museum. The mosaic from the synagogue in Gaza (fig. 6) is the most prominent example of all: the explanation makes it seem that the mosaic is a testimony to a large and well-established Jewish settlement in Gaza during the Byzantine period. It also states that the mosaic, which was exposed on the Gaza beach, was transferred in 1985 to the village of Netzarim (an Israeli settlement in the heart of Gaza that was evacuated in 2005) and following the evacuation of Gush Katif (the Jewish settlements in Gaza) was relocated to the Good Samaritan Museum. Yet, no explanation is offered regarding the mutual influences—stylistic and cultural—between the various populations living side by side, bearing light on the relations between the ancient Jewish

settlement in Gaza and the non-Jewish communities who lived in the area. Moreover, no explanation is offered for the decision to transfer the mosaic to the village of Netzarim and later to the Good Samaritan Museum, although most Israeli visitors will be able to read between the lines: the mosaic arrived here because of the "disengagement" (from Gaza) and the desire to keep it in Israeli hands.

The choice of the Parable of the Good Samaritan as the guiding principle for the design of the museum reinforces the perception that the cultural connection to Mishor Adomim and to the entire West Bank can be claimed exclusively by Israel. Although many items in the museum are associated with the Samaritan and Christian faiths, the explanatory labels emphasize the Jewish features which influenced the two other religions. For example, the explanations about the Samaritan faith focus mainly on the divergences from Jewish traditions, laws, and practices (Figure 9).



Figure 9: Section of the exhibition featuring Samaritan mosaics

Even the explanations for the Christian mosaics are Judeo-centric. For instance, a room displaying mosaics from churches, features an inscription discovered in the Byzantine Church in Shiloh (Fig. 10) that alludes to Jewish traditions which locate the site of the biblical Tabernacle (the portable divine dwelling) to the site of Tel Shiloh (an archaeological tel also in the West Bank).



Figure 10: The inscription from the church at Tel Shiloh⁵

The choice of the Good Samaritan story lends legitimacy to the absence of mosaics from Islamic periods in the museum. This is despite the fact the mosaic industry reached its zenith in the early

⁵ Photo dr. Avishai Teicher: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=23180079>

Islamic period. It is worth asking whether "the only mosaic museum in Israel," as it is presented in the audio guide, has no room for artifacts from this important period? In fact, the choice of the Good Samaritan story makes it possible to ignore any contribution by Muslim and Palestinian culture to the features of the site and to the built-up heritage of the West Bank. This omission is also apparent at the observation point where the audio guide describes the site of the museum as part of a continuum of Jewish settlements, which runs from Jerusalem through the settlement of Ma'aleh Adumim to the area of Mishor Adumim, adjacent to the museum. The Palestinian communities located nearby and the city of Jericho are not mentioned even once. As mentioned, one of the central points made by the audio guide is the location of the museum along one of the main pilgrimage routes to the Temple, on the border between the tribe of Judah and the tribe of Benjamin. Apparently, any later reference to the site's location along Christian and Muslim pilgrimage routes to Jerusalem, to the Temple Mount, or to the tombs of sheikhs such as the nearby tomb of Nabi Musa were deemed irrelevant for the understanding of the site's historical and geographical importance.

The museum curators created a semblance of multiculturalism which might appeal to a wide common denominator in Israel. However, this contrived multiculturalism indicates how the museums serve the State when it comes to inventing a mythological past whereby the land belonged exclusively to Jews (of whom the Samaritans are supposedly a subgroup) and Christians. The museum is another economic-tourism tool for creating a sterile space that excludes the Palestinians and Islam, blurs the green line between Israel, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and reinforces the perception that Palestinians are invaders without roots and rights in the land.

The Eretz Yehuda Museum in Kiryat Arba



Figure 1: The Eretz Yehuda Museum in Kiryat Arba

The Eretz Yehuda Museum (Land of Judea Museum) is located on the top floor of the local council building in the settlement of Kiryat Arba, adjacent to Hebron. According to the manager's statement, the museum was established as an attempt to diversify the possibilities for leisure activities in Kiryat Arba.⁶ The exhibition in the museum depicts the history of the Land of Israel from the Early Bronze Age (around 3000 BCE)—also dubbed as the "Early Canaanite Period"—until the Jews' return to Zion from exile during the Persian period (6th-5th centuries BCE). The museum has a number of display cases dedicated to presenting the material finds characteristic of each period (Fig. 2). There is a brief explanation of the characteristics and major events of each period in the Land of Israel with a focus on the history of the Jewish people as described in the Bible (Fig. 3). The exhibition does not mention the influence of cultures such as the Roman Empire and later of the Byzantine and Islamic empires. Moreover, the explanations ignore the history of Hebron and its surroundings as well as the contemporary landscape. In this

⁶ Amit, G. 2006. [Visit to "Eretz Yehuda Archaeological Museum" in Kiryat Arba](#), *Ha'aretz* online (Hebrew), retrieved September 15, 2017

sense, the museum has become a source of information about the history of the Land of Israel for tourists who are probably unaware of the political and ideological considerations that have shaped the representation of the past. Since the establishment of the museum, and more so after the adoption of the Museums' Law, the state has demonstrated an intention to become involved in further developing the museum and promoting large-scale tourism projects that will emphasize Hebron's Jewish past while ignoring the Arab-Muslim history of the city.



Figure 2: Display cases in the Eretz Yehuda Museum



Figure 3: Museum label in the Eretz Yehuda Museum

In 2002, the museum was inaugurated in the presence of then-President Moshe Katsav, a status that expressed symbolic recognition of its national importance. However, at the time, the state refrained from turning this symbolic recognition into practical support which would have required allocating a budget to the museum.

However, all this changed after the adoption of the Museums Law in 2012. At the end of 2016, a plan that had been discussed since 2012 was approved, involving mainly the construction of a park south of Givat Mamra neighborhood, known as "Alon Park." The park is slated to include a tourism center with a picnic area, a commercial area, a hotel and more⁷ (Fig. 4). According to a plan that has yet to be approved, the Eretz Yehuda Museum will be moved to a new site that will link to the Alon Park via a bridge or a tunnel. According to this plan, the museum will become a

⁷ See the [Park Alon plan](#) in Kiryat Arba, Planning Authority Website (Hebrew), retrieved September 15, 2017

visitors' center, a "regional icon visible from a distance which will become an experiential gateway to the tourist area," and will present "biblical, historical, archaeological and contemporary content," as well as offer visitors "an initial encounter and prepare them for their arrival at the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron."⁸

This plan will complete the museum's transformation from a local institution built mainly for the residents of Kiryat Arba, to a part of a regional tourism project designed to entrench the Jewish-religious narrative. The park will block Palestinians' access to their homes and prevent them from cultivating their agricultural lands.⁹ It can be assumed that Palestinians will not even be allowed to visit the new museum and enjoy the park that will be built on their property. Thus, the museum will become part of a project that is essentially similar to the Good Samaritan Museum: a means of creating spaces that ignore both the heritage of the Palestinian people and their very existence so close to the site.

⁸ [Eretz Yehuda Museum](#)

⁹ See [protocol of meeting](#) from January 11, 2017 in the Subcommittee for Objections in the District Planning Committee for the Towns, Villages and Buildings concerning the Alon Park, retrieved September 2, 2017.



Figure 4: Elon Park—Position Plan

Conclusion

This document demonstrates how museums in the West Bank function as instruments for the State to invest the West Bank with Jewish historical and religious significance while deliberately ignoring the Palestinian presence in the past and present. In the Good Samaritan Museum, the references to the Samaritan and Christian faiths are usually made in the context of the importance attributed to Judaism in shaping the cultural, religious, and geographic landscape. The adoption of the Israeli Museums Law as a military order in the West Bank has enabled the establishment of museums that convey this message. Thus, the Good Samaritan Museum is an example of a museum established with state support which brings together exhibits from all over the West Bank and even from Gaza. The target audiences are Israelis and Christians, and it is clearly informed by narrow financial and ideological considerations.

The Eretz Yehuda Museum in Kiryat Arba, designed at the time of its establishment for the local community of Hebron settlers, reveals how the adoption of the Museums Law in the West Bank has turned a local venture into an ambitious and resource-rich national tourism project. The goal of the project is to strengthen the Jewish historical connection to Hebron through tourist attractions such as a museum and a large park. During a recent visit to the Eretz Yehuda Museum for the purpose of writing this report, we were told that the plans for constructing a new building may have been put on hold for the time being. In its place, the possibility of hiring an expert designer of visitor centers and museums is being considered for the purpose of enriching the contents of the museum and the visitors' experience. Although we were not told which narratives will be featured in this future center, based on the development plans described in this document we can assume that "enriching the content" alludes to the reinforcement of the narrative of the Jewish belonging to the land.

The two examples reviewed in this document illustrate how budgets allocated to museums—including existing museums and new state-funded museums in settlements—are used in a similar fashion. Visitors to the Hebron settlers' museum (Eretz Yehuda) and to the one museum run by the Nature and Parks Authority (the Good Samaritan Museum) will come to very similar conclusions about the dominant culture in the region – in antiquity and at present . Both museums are characterized by a disturbing disregard for the multicultural past of the region and, in particular, an omission of hundreds of years of Arab-Muslim presence. The narratives that they present seek to erase the story that is visible to all who drive around the West Bank and encounter Palestinian villages alongside settlements, checkpoints and soldiers.