

Materializing the Bible: Ethnographic Methods for the Consumption Process

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the world there are over 200 sites that materialize the Bible, that is, sites that transform the written words of biblical scripture into physical, experiential attractions. These sites are definitively hybrid, integrating religion and entertainment, piety and play, fun and faith, commerce and devotion, pleasure and education. Religious studies scholars and anthropologists have published insightful works about selected sites, but no genre-wide analytical appraisal exists. In this article, I focus on how religiously committed visitors approach and experience these sites. Framed in a comparative register with research in religious tourism and pilgrimage studies, I propose analytical and methodological frameworks for the ethnographic study of Bible-based attractions.

INTRODUCTION

A global “multibillion-dollar Christian leisure industry [is] today integral to how Americans practice their faith.”¹ This industry, and the forms of pilgrimage and religious tourism it fosters, is threaded together with the structures of late capitalism, modern technology, and other cultural imprints (e.g., entertainment). Scholars of lived religion are tasked with understanding how the destinations that comprise this industry fit into the religious lives of consumers. Might Christian leisure destinations occupy a distinctive role vis-a-vis other sites of religious practice and theological formation? Do these destinations open devotional potentials that are limited, muted, denied, or cut short in the course of day-to-day, week-to-week, routinized religious lives?

In this article, I explore how religiously committed visitors approach and experience a particular

species of the Christian leisure industry: Bible-based attractions. My aim in this article is to propose analytical and methodological frameworks that can be used in both the ethnographic study of Bible-based attractions and Christian leisure destinations more broadly. The frameworks identified and examined here will be a generative resource for future scholars seeking to understand how such attractions and destinations are incorporated into the religious lives of visitors.

By focusing on the interaction between Bible-based attractions and religiously committed visitors, this article engages the study of consumption or “reception.” This approach informs our comparative understanding of lived religion, religious popular culture, and religious travel, and allows us to ask questions about the kind of practices enabled and delimited by different consumption sites.² How do visitors experience Bible-based attractions and how do they incorporate this experience into their schemas of faith? How do these experiences reflect back onto contemporary cultural contours? Consuming these attractions is always grounded in projects of identity formation and we are well served to understand visiting them as a religious practice that works alongside other practices that fill everyday Christian lives (e.g., prayer, reading, Bible study, worship, social engagement).

While there are numerous insightful studies of different attractions – such as Kentucky’s Creation Museum, Orlando’s Holy Land Experience, Hong Kong Noah’s Ark, and Nazareth Village – there is little rigorous fieldwork on the process of consumption.³ Instead, studies of Bible-based attractions are primarily conducted as scholars performing a critical analysis of the place. At most there is some informational interviewing with key personnel (e.g., an attraction’s founder) or anecdotal reporting about random encounters with visitors. Why does this ethnographic absence persist? There are pragmatic reasons, such as the difficulty of visiting sites repeatedly. There are also lingering ideologies that such attractions are merely “Christian kitsch,” a category replete with class prejudice and biases against popular religious expressions.⁴ Perhaps most important, there is an absence of a clear and compelling statement about why these sites matter as a particular species of Christian leisure. This article is designed to help fill this latter void. It does so by engaging the ethnography of pilgrimage and religious tourism, which provides a rich analogue for developing analytical and methodological frameworks.

The decision to focus exclusively on religiously committed visitors deserves two caveats. First, this leaves questions about how non-committed visitors consume Bible-based attractions unaddressed, bracketing two poles of experience. Many of these attractions fashion themselves as opportunities for evangelism and conversion. At present, we have no data on what role the attractions might play in experiences or narratives of conversion. Additionally, there is the practice of visiting Bible-based attractions to perform critique. For example, atheist groups will visit creation museums to confront an ideological Other and take pleasure in mocking the site and the worldview it presents.⁵ How does an atheist experience a creation museum and how do they incorporate that experience into their schemas of skepticism? Conversion and mockery are both useful analytical directions, but they are bracketed in this article.

The second caveat is a clarification. Focusing on a singular vantage point should not be mistaken as focusing on a singular experiential stance. Religiously committed visitors are not bound to utterly sincere religious devotion; sincere religious devotion can be expressed in numerous ways; and commitment can be grounded in differing religious traditions and identities. We must leave room for multiple and potentially

conflicting itineraries, and creative acts of consumption, from irony to invention, play, and experimentation.⁶ This need to understand variations in consumption helped propelled the landmark shift in pilgrimage studies from *communitas* to contestation.⁷

MATERIALIZING THE BIBLE

There are at least 218 Bible-based attractions globally, which can be divided into five sub-genres.⁸ Re-Creations feature replications of biblical scenes, stories, and characters. Creation Museums adopt the form of a natural history museum to advocate young earth creationism and denounce evolutionary science. Bible History Museums house and display biblical manuscripts, archaeological artifacts and replicas, and other material items to promote the textual ideology that “God’s Word” has been divinely preserved over time.⁹ Biblical Gardens are sites where visitors walk through cultivated areas of natural flora with only trees, plants, flowers, and shrubs named in scripture. And, Art Collections feature representations of biblical scenes, stories, and characters in etched, painted, sculpted, drawn, and other media formats.

The majority of attractions (N=136) are located in the continental United States. The remaining 82 are distributed across 28 nations.¹⁰ Some sites emerge from ecumenical desires and organizations, but many can be traced to particular religious traditions. The two most prominent are Roman Catholic and fundamentalist Protestant. Irrespective of location or affiliation, all the sites share two organizing imperatives. They seek, as many self-proclaim, to ‘make the Bible come alive’ by transforming written scriptural words into a material, experiential environment. And, they seek to integrate religious faith with pleasure and religious education.

My interest in materializing the Bible was sparked in October 2011 when I began ethnographic fieldwork with the creative team in charge of conceptualizing and designing a biblical theme park.¹¹ Williamstown, Kentucky (pop. ~3,000) is preparing for the July 2016 opening of Ark Encounter: an 800-acre, \$150 million attraction whose creators claim will attract at least 1.4 million ticket-buying visitors in its opening year.¹² The centerpiece of Ark Encounter is a re-creation of Noah’s ark, built to creationist specification from the text of Genesis 6-9: 51 feet tall, 85 feet wide, 510 feet long. Onboard, visitors will walk through three decks filled with 132 exhibit bays and 100,000 square feet of themed exhibit space that uses multi-modal entertainment registers to teach creationist history, theology, and challenge evolutionary science.

The ethnographic backbone of this project was the team’s daily creative labor. It addressed the work of a small team working from small desks: usually tedious, frequently under deadline, ever conscious of budgetary constraints, and constantly seeking the next imaginative breakthrough. In fall 2014 my ethnographic energies shifted to exploring how committed creationists will experience Ark Encounter. This fieldwork phase has three stages: (1) conducting semi-structured interviews with creationists who will visit Ark Encounter soon after it opens with their congregation; (2) visiting Ark Encounter with this group of interviewees; and (3) conducting a second round of interviews with visitors following our trip to the park. This article emerges from my effort to understand the process of consumption among creationists visitors

to Ark Encounter. But, my ambition here exceeds the Ark and creationism. The frameworks proposed are directly applicable to the study of consumption at all Bible-based attractions as well as more broadly to other Christian leisure destinations.

THE PROCESS OF CONSUMPTION

I approach “consumption” as a process, not an act, with three stages: Preparation (to make a visit to the site); Experiential Engagement (at the site); and, Reflection (after the site visit is complete).¹³ To explore each of these stages, I integrate comparative examples that range from historically revered and officially sanctioned religious destinations to replicas of those destinations, museums, theme parks, and shrines. Working comparatively raises its own questions, such as how closely the consumption process at one kind of site (e.g., Holy Land destinations in Israel-Palestine) coheres with other sites (e.g., Holy Land replicas). There are significant differences to consider. For example, how does a site’s relationship to the past structure the consumption process? A site that claims historical originality and a recently built replica of that original are likely to enable different potentials for religious practice and sacred attachment. The comparisons below do not elide such differences, but the focus does remain on how broader scholarship on Christian tourism and pilgrimage opens analytical and methodological possibilities for studying Bible-based attractions.

PREPARATION

The consumption process begins as visitors prepare to visit a Bible-based attraction. This is true whether the site requires a short drive or lengthy air travel. This pre-visit stage may include physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional preparation; defined and amorphous expectations; and forms of trip planning. Visitors ask themselves: What am I excited for? What am I curious about? Am I hesitant or anxious about anything? What will I do first?

In her superb ethnography of American Christian Holy Land pilgrimage, Hillary Kaell provides a rigorous account of making preparations.¹⁴ She demonstrates how the preparation stage is integral to the pilgrimage experience, a time when travelers begin incorporating the experience into their religious life. We can conceptualize this stage in two parts: the structural conditions that inform preparation, and the agentive actions that visitors self-consciously engage in.

Relevant structural factors vary widely. Kaell devotes an entire chapter to the Holy Land narratives and ideologies American Christians are socialized into. As they arrive at the Tel Aviv airport and meet their tour guide, these pilgrims bring with them a lifetime of images and ideas about landscape, people, culture, and the biblical past.

Accumulated ideologies also figure heavily with re-creations of Noah’s ark. The Genesis story and

the ark as a material construction have been a source of fascination for centuries. Artistic renderings of Noah's ark are found as early as the fourth century on the walls of St. Peter's tomb.¹⁵ Historian Janet Brown observes a "long artistic tradition, in paintings and sculpture" of the ark in the West.¹⁶ In the 17th century Athanasius Kircher produced the earliest realist-oriented portrait of the ark, estimating the number of stalls, animals, and "the logistics of stabling, feeding, and cleaning the animals were worked out in exhaustive detail."¹⁷ Many contemporary ark portraits resemble a 1985 artistic representation that resulted from a 1970s archaeological expedition on Mt. Ararat, one of many evangelical-led expeditions to discover the ark's physical remains.¹⁸ More cartoonish versions abound as well (think: long giraffe necks protruding from a small boat). The countless iterations of "bathtub arks" are a target of critique for creationists.¹⁹ They consider any non-realist ark representation to be far from innocent, complicit in secular-derived schemes to undermine scriptural authority by dismissing its historicity.

The structural generation of expectations also includes the circulating forms of publicity attached to an attraction. Publicity is a key dynamic in contemporary religious life. In his critique of the category "public religion," anthropologist Matthew Engelke argues that "when we talk about 'public religion' today we are often actually talking about 'religious publicity.'"²⁰ By this he means a process of producing and circulating religious content and frames of reference in the public sphere. Further, religious publicity highlights that the status of religion being public should not be taken for granted. "Public" should be understood as a status that is actively pursued, achieved, and promoted by socially positioned religious actors, possessed by particular strategic aims.

Bible-based attractions regularly generate self-publicity. Ark Encounter, in a marketing effort to secure and keep consumer interest prior to the site's opening, certainly does. They rent billboards throughout the United States and maintain an interactive website with a weblog. Blogging began in December 2010 when Ark Encounter was announced to the public and, as of March 2016, there are 244 posts that address numerous topics. A few patterns are discernible despite the wide topical range:

(1) Posts take a stance of correcting public misperceptions about Ark Encounter. In doing so they foster creationist commitments about secular conspiracies and a secular culture war against Christianity.²¹ "Taxpayers 'On the Hook?'" – a January 2011 post – led with this: "A recent editorial in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette came out against the Ark Encounter, but its reasoning was all wrong! The editorial, which has been reprinted in at least two other newspapers, misleads people to believe that Kentucky taxpayers are 'on the hook' for 25 percent of the total cost of the project."

(2) Posts explain details of creation science. "Forgotten Fauna," a series of nine posts published between April 2014 and February 2015, introduces readers to the creationist theological-biological category of "animal kinds." This series discusses examples of animal species that are now extinct, but for which there is fossil evidence and therefore would have been on the ark.

(3) Posts offer the public "sneak peeks" that go "behind the scenes" of the architectural and artistic production processes. Snippet views act as teasers, pieces of an extended preview trailer. Photographic and video footage tracking the development of the ark itself at the construction site began in August 2014 with the official groundbreaking. Meanwhile, back in the studio, posts provide glimpses of the creative team's work. "Depicting the Ark's Passengers," a series of 12 posts published between May 2012 and September

2014, reveal the concept art for Noah and his family.

(4) Posts ask the public to “imagine” the world of Noah and to entertain other ways of being immersed in the creationist version of biblical history. In this example from September 2015, the immersive entreaty is accompanied by an expression of fundamentalist typological hermeneutics²²:

Taking a trip through the Ark design studio warehouse reveals just how much things are beginning to pile up. Many of the exhibits, cages, and cargo boxes await the day when we can start shipping things down to the Ark site to be assembled inside the Ark. Imagine Noah’s faith. Not only did he build the Ark according to God’s specific dimensions, but can you fathom the logistics involved in gathering enough food and supplies for his family and all of the animals. Imagine all of the space all of these items would take up as the Ark was being prepared. Did he need to build storehouses just for these items? Did animals arrive early to give Noah’s family time to study their habits so that they would know what kinds of food and how much of it to bring? How much space would they require? Noah’s responsibilities involved so much more than building the Ark itself. (emphasis mine)

When Ark Encounter opens, it will have been a project-in-the-making for nearly six years. Six years of publicity is part of the structural accumulation that informs visitor preparations to visit the Ark. Understanding the contours of such discursive and ideological accumulation enables us to better contextualize how visitors experience attractions.

The preparatory stage of consumption also includes agentive actions that visitors self-consciously perform in order to ready themselves for the visit. Kaell observes an important tension among American Holy Land pilgrims. On one hand, the organized prepackaged tours that most pilgrims join typically request formal preparation (e.g., Bible reading). However, few pilgrims complete these tasks. On the other hand, they engage in substantial informal preparation. “While prospective pilgrims generally do little to prepare in a formal sense - few complete the assigned readings, for example - they lay the groundwork for interpretations that take shape more fully upon return each time they describe the upcoming trip to others.”²³ Talking with family, friends, fellow congregants, and strangers becomes a ritual of preparation where visitors activate ideological frames of reference. Kaell also observes how pilgrims incorporate new or extended physical regimens into their preparation.²⁴ Many were older adults and expected pilgrimage to involve significant walking in terrains of varying difficulty. Here, the human body – with its potential frailties and capacities – becomes a preparatory training ground in the consumption process.

The question of how visitors prepare for experiential engagement at an attraction is largely uncharted territory. Consider one possible scenario of preparation. How do visitors prepare for visits to Holy Land replica sites? There are at least 19 replica attractions around the world. Most are in the continental United States (N=11), but they can be found in locales as wide ranging as the Caribbean, Western Europe, Southeast Asia, South America, and Eastern Europe. They vary widely in style and defining register. The Holy Land Experience (Orlando, FL) and Tierra Santa (Buenos Aires, Argentina) market themselves as theme parks. The Franciscan Order of Catholic Monastics, the Vatican-ordered caretakers of the Holy Land, have a long history of creating replica sites from Valsesia, Italy (1490s) to Washington, DC (1890s). And, a 17th century

replica of a 16th century map of Jerusalem in Poland (Kalwaria Zebrzydowska Park) is a UNESCO World Heritage site. Are Holy Land preparatory and pilgrimage repertoires used to prepare for these replicas? Do visitors incorporate actual Holy Land materials (images, stories, films, archaeology, etc.) into their preparing? If visitors have made pilgrimage to the Holy Land, are these materials used for replica preparation? In short, is there a preparatory mimesis to complement the material mimetic features of the sites themselves?

THINKING FIELDWORK METHODS

1. Pre-Visit Interviews: A round of recorded, semi-structured interviews prior to the site visit is an instrumental way to talk with visitors about their expectations. Depending on the context, these interviews may be conducted one-on-one, with married couples, families, or in small focus groups. Also, depending on context, these interviews might use open-ended questions that invite visitors to articulate their anticipations and curiosities, or elicitation devices to aid reflection (e.g., material objects, photographs, video footage, publicity materials). These interviews can help unearth unexpected hesitations. For example, in September 2015 I conducted an Ark Encounter pre-visit interview with a married couple in their early 30s. These interviews are divided into three portions: a spiritual life history, personal history with creationism, and response to video publicity materials. After we finished their personal histories with creationism, the husband stopped me to voice a concern that committed believers will support the park even if the quality is mediocre: “A lot of Christians eat bad cake just because it has Jesus sprinkles. Do you know what I mean?”

2. Tracking Publicity: Because publicity is part of the structural accumulation that informs consumption, it is important to track the materials that are produced. This includes a range of physical and virtual forms: advertisements (on billboards, in magazines or newspapers, as webpage pop-ups); webpages; weblogs; social media (Facebook and Twitter posts); regularly circulated newsletters; flyers and information cards. Additionally, it is instructive to collect publicity produced about the attraction from both supportive and suspicious sources. This might include local and national newspapers; mass circulated magazines for popular and niche audiences; and social media reporting by individuals and institutions. A useful strategy, which nearly eliminates the tedium of hunting and pecking for new reports, is signing up for Google news alerts.

3. Pre-Visit Mapping: Before accompanying visitors, the ethnographer should thoroughly map the site on their own or with a research team. This includes detailed field

notes, collecting site materials (e.g., guide map), photography, and spatial schematics. The field notes should be a multi-sensory account, attending not just to what is there but how you experience the place. One advantage of doing pre-visit mapping is to prepare for being there as a participant observer with visitors. For example, my first visit to Kentucky's Creation Museum was exhausting due to the significant amount of text to read throughout the space paired with observing each exhibit's intricate detail. For many attractions, it is essentially impossible to document the site for the first time and concentrate on being there with visitors.

EXPERIENTIAL ENGAGEMENT

The focal point of the consumption process is visitors' experiential engagement at the site. Similar to preparation, we can divide this stage into the contextual frames for engagement and the agentive forms of engagement. This analytical division should not be mistaken for any discrete division in practice. Contextual frames and agentive forms are always joined in a dialectical relation. To illustrate, I highlight three potential contextual frames.

First, we can consider the site's location and spatial organization. Anthropologist Simon Coleman has emphasized this frame in his research at the English site of Walsingham, a small village that hosts Catholic and Anglican Marian shrines.²⁵ The shrines commemorate an apparition experienced by a Saxon noblewoman in 1060, in which Mary requested that a replica of "the Holy House" (the house where Mary and Joseph raised Jesus in Nazareth) be built. The original replica and shrine were razed in 1538 during Henry VIII's Dissolution. A replica of the replica, claiming to be on the apparition's original location, was built in 1931. Today, it is England's "foremost site of Christian pilgrimage."²⁶

Coleman observes how the site's physical and spatial properties help structure the experiential engagement. The rural setting invokes the "image of the medieval" and a distinct set apart-ness from the "urban eyes" of most visitors. The rural signifies "a place very different from the everyday (appropriate to the liminal space and time of pilgrimage) [and] the ability to reach into a past world that can speak to the present."²⁷ The site's divisions between Catholic and Anglican shrines are also significant. There are various opportunities to engage physically with the site, from lighting candles to collecting holy water from the site's well (an artifact claimed to date to the time of the apparition). The jumble of ritual forms brought together at the site creates a "liturgical incoherence [where] different groups of pilgrims from different locations can be engaged in separate liturgies simultaneously."²⁸ Then, there are the site's erasures. A 1961 archaeological finding most likely identified the original replica's actual location, but it is largely ignored and noted only by a small plaque. In turn, visitors spend far more time at the 1931 replica.

A second frame for experiential engagement is the social context in which visitors go to a site. Do they go as individuals? With family? With friends? As part of a congregational group? A pre-packaged tour? I once met a Seattle pastor who visited Kentucky's Creation Museum as part of a denominational pastors'

retreat. He walked the exhibit not with his wife and children, but with his ministerial colleagues - perhaps trading notes for sermons and Bible study curricula? The relevance of social context has been visible in the Ark Encounter pre-visit interviews. Jesus sprinkles were not the only anxiety. The married couple hopes the Ark will be built with kids in mind. They have four children, all under the age of 12. They spoke at length about what features make a site enjoyable for children and adults together, and what features create hurdles to enjoyment. Their sentiment was clear: if the kids aren't happy, no one is happy.

Guiding materials and performances are a third contextual frame. Visitors often experience Bible-based attractions with the aid of pre-made guidebooks, maps, directions, pamphlets, flyers and/or a trained guide.²⁹ By no means determinative, guiding does significantly structure the experience. Paper or electronic guide materials direct visitors in many ways: suggesting ideal routes through the attraction, raising particular theological questions (and not others), highlighting particular scriptural passages (and not others), and narrating particular site histories (and not others). Regarding the role of trained guides in structuring consumption, anthropologist Jackie Feldman's ethnography of evangelical Holy Land pilgrims is exemplary.³⁰ Feldman's work centers on his two decades worth of experience leading evangelical pilgrimages in Israel-Palestine. He demonstrates how guides use carefully crafted itineraries, repertoires of local knowledge, and well-rehearsed performances to frame touring experiences. This can encompass forms of exclusion. For example, Feldman illustrates how guiding performances reproduce the Protestant focus on biblical land at the expense of contemporary conflicts involving Palestinians and local Islamic history.³¹

Various contextual frames structure visitors' experience at Bible-based attractions, from location and spatial organization to social context and guiding materials. Still, experiential engagement is a fully agentic process. An argument that runs throughout Coleman's writing about Walsingham is that pilgrims marshal various forms of creative performance. They "become bricoleurs, selecting fragments of rituals, symbols, even spaces as building blocks for their personal pilgrimages," and engage in ironic play regarding "official" and "traditional" religious discourses.³²

"Devotional labor" is a useful concept for exploring creative performances. I adopt this term from Elaine Pena's ethnography of Mexican and Mexican American pilgrimage rites and routes surrounding the Virgin of Guadalupe.³³ Pena observes how individuals perform ritual work as part of the pilgrimage experience: walking, singing, praying, dancing, shrine maintenance, making crafts, preparing and eating food, and other practices that are often artificially separated as either ritual or mundane. What forms of devotional labor characterize Bible-based attractions? Is there prayer and if so, where is it concentrated? What does the absence of prayer at a site signify? Is there Bible reading and where does it concentrate? What of its absence? What about other forms of visitor practice, actions that may not immediately index religious ritual? Where do visitors take photographs of each other and themselves as selfies? How do visitors respond to interactive prompts built into attractions (e.g., smelling flowers and herbs in biblical gardens, engaging 'hands-on' learning exercises at creation museums)?

Uses of materiality are an important form of devotional labor. This plays a pivotal role in Kaell's analysis of Holy Land pilgrimage.³⁴ For example, pilgrims collect objects from the land (e.g., stones, sand, wood) as gifts and souvenirs. Landscape materials carry the power of direct indexicality because of their natural links to biblical land. Pilgrims also purchase gifts and souvenirs, investing commodity consumption

with sacred potential. This raises an intriguing possibility: Bible-based attraction gift shops as a key ethnographic site. What items do visitors buy? How much do they cost? Who do visitors purchase gifts for? What items do attractions keep in stock? Where were the items made and who made them?

For another use of materiality as devotional labor consider an example from the Holy Land Experience (HLE).³⁵ HLE is a fifteen-acre “living, biblical museum” in Orlando, Florida that teaches Christian themes in a themed environment eleven miles northeast of the Walt Disney World Resort. There, people pin their prayers to a cross.

At the “Testimony Cross Garden,” visitors write out prayers on small slips of paper and attach them to a nearby wooden cross. This ritual form involves several constitutive material acts. There is the writing itself. Like keeping a daily prayer journal or submitting a prayer card to a popular ministry, spiritual power is harnessed by putting pen to paper and externalizing human interiors.³⁶ This extends the associations between writing technology and faith emphasized by other Christian performances, such as when one sings the opening lines of a southern Gospel music standard: “When God dips His pen of love in my heart and writes my soul a message He wants me to know.” Then, there is the folding. Each prayer is bent; some loose and uneven, some tight and perfectly aligned. Folding eases a tension between the public quality of the cross and the secrecy of each paper’s contents (‘this is just between me and God’). Once folded, there are the bodily acts of kneeling and stretching to attach the paper. The power here works via iconicity: the park map that each visitor receives when entering HLE prompts you to “nail your burdens (prayer requests) to the cross.”

The materiality of this ritual transforms a prayer into a thing: a small piece of writing. What happens when prayers become things? A sign standing a short walk from the Testimony Cross Garden suggests an answer. The sign reads: “Have your personal prayer requests placed between the ancient stones at Jerusalem’s Western Wall. Monthly transportation to Israel provided free of charge.” When these prayers become small pieces of writing they become something that can travel easily. Small pieces of writing can be gathered, packed together, and transported. The destination of these traveling prayers is not incidental. Jerusalem’s Western Wall is a pivotal site for Protestant pilgrims to the Holy Land. Christian claims to the Wall, such as inserting written prayers into its fissures, participate symbolically in the ongoing contest over biblical land, as the Wall also receives the devotional labor of Jewish and Muslim pray-ers. Transforming prayer into a thing is a matter of efficacy. The power of your request or report is intensified when you write it out on a small square of colored paper; its intensification furthers when pinned to the cross; and intensified again when it travels to a crevice in Jerusalem. As prayers become things they forge a link between two places: a “living, biblical museum” in Florida and the Holy Land sites that inspire Orlando’s materialized re-creations.

Visitors’ creative performances also include the discursive-ideological scripts used to make sense of experiential engagements. Kaell observes how American Holy Land pilgrims (both Protestant and Catholic) draw on distinctly American scripts as they confront Israel-Palestine’s dizzying social, political, and religious pluralism. For example, they map American settler ideologies about westward expansion onto Palestinian displacements.³⁷ Coleman argues that Walsingham pilgrims (Catholic, Anglican, and secular) engage the site through a distinctly nationalist script. Alongside its mystical heritage, pilgrims invest Walsingham with the importance of being an English historical landmark. In turn, “the boundaries between tourism and

pilgrimage have become attenuated if not impossible to detect.”³⁸

An unexpected consumption script was suggested to me during an interview with a designer on the Ark Encounter creative team. I had asked him what artistic influences he uses to re-create scenes from the biblical past. After naming a few examples, he reflected on a necessary tactic he must engage as he seeks reference material: “The secular world owns probably 99% of all the material out there, so you have to like reinterpret most of it.” As an artist, he lives in a one percent world, a world where almost everything he encounters demands cautious and critical use. He must read between the lines, scanning for clues of evolutionary contamination. It is quite likely that creationist visitors activate a similar script when consuming creationist attractions: they enjoy the sanctity of not having to reinterpret, exploring exhibits and sites freely without the burden of scanning for information they consider ideologically dangerous. How far does this extend across other Bible-based attractions? Do non-creationist visitors who feel equally embattled, albeit for different reasons, activate similar scripts at non-creationist attractions?

THINKING FIELDWORK METHODS

1. Shadowing Visitors: This is a key technique when doing participant observation of experiential engagement. The goal is to accompany visitors throughout an attraction, beginning from the point of departure (a home, a church) and continuing for the entire visit (a day, a weekend, a week). Shadowing includes periodic interviewing (during lunch, in a quiet zone after experiencing a portion of the site) and close observation of devotional labor performances. The primary danger to monitor and minimize is distracting visitors. One strategy for limiting this is to shadow small groups instead of individuals.
2. Sensory Walks: The consumption process is deeply material and embodied, which means it is a thoroughly sensory experience. A methodological model for eliciting the sensory experiences of visitors is found among urban ethnographers who map sense-scapes. They walk city streets with consultants, dialed solely into a particular sense. For example, Kelvin Low used “smellscape walkabouts with informants so as to examine the sociocultural meanings associated with olfaction in ethnic enclaves.”³⁹
3. GPS Tracking: The qualitative data gained from shadowing and sensory walks can be complemented by quantitative tools that record how visitors spatially explore attractions. Geographers use this method with Global Positioning Systems technology that records the movements of tourists throughout a designated area.⁴⁰ This addresses such questions as the consumptive routes that visitors create throughout an attraction, and where visitors focus their consumptive time within an attraction.

4. Border zones: Many Bible-based attractions are located adjacent to off site locations where visitors gather before and after visits. How do visitors use these border zones? This was a valuable strategy in Coleman's Walsingham fieldwork. He discovered that in village pubs and cafes surrounding the official grounds visitors engaged in serious debates about the "authenticity of different parts of the site." Such debates were absent from the devotional labor performed on the grounds.⁴¹

REFLECTION

In the final stage of the consumption process visitors reflect on their experiential engagement at the attraction and consider the forward-looking implications of having been there. Were expectations met? Were there surprises? Disappointments? Are they compelled to some kind of practice because of their experience at the attraction? Did the attraction impact any of their cultural commitments?

Ethnographically, we should expect the reflection process to be quite open-ended and deeply contextual, that is tied very closely to the nature of the attraction, visitors' motivations for going, and the social contextual frame of the experience. Consider just two examples that may be instructive for future research.

Since beginning fieldwork on Ark Encounter in 2011 I have spoken with many friends and colleagues about the project. Many of these conversations include a discussion of the Creation Museum, since both are affiliated with the same ministry. Those who have not visited the Museum are overwhelmingly curious about it. Those who have are eager to share their story. One conversation stands out in particular because of a potential disappointment it raises. Glenn, a house church pastor in his early 40s, is a friend of mine and was a key consultant in a previous ethnographic project.⁴² Neither Glenn nor his wife Cathy are young earth creationists, but they both were for many years. Her parents are still creationists, and on a family visit in 2008 they wanted Glenn and Cathy to take them to the Museum. When Glenn told me about their experience he focused on one memory, perhaps because he was struck by the same disappointment. Cathy's father was very excited for the Museum, but after spending a day there he was upset by the commercial saturation. Glenn remembered his father-in-law's discontent in more vernacular terms, something closer to 'every time you turn around they're trying to sell you something.' He responded negatively to what he considered an extreme and distasteful experience of commodification. In what ways might commercial elements enhance or disturb a visitor's experiential engagement? When an attraction has an entry cost, do visitors have different expectations? Do they find the experience worth the price of admission? What forms of commodification are engaged as productive for the experience, which are acceptable, and which are corrosive? When is 'the gift shop' normalized and when is it troubled by visitors?

A second example returns to Kaell's research among Holy Land pilgrims. In a series of reflection interviews with pilgrims she discovered a range of responses to the experience of visiting biblical lands. Kaell concludes her book by describing pilgrims who incorporated changes into their life because of their time in Israel-Palestine. For example, several individuals had started participating in forms of pro-Palestinian activism after witnessing what they considered the persecution of Palestinian Christians.⁴³ How pervasive

are such prompts to new practice and imagination? What are the predictive variables for such prompting in the experience of Bible-based attractions?

THINKING FIELDWORK METHODS

1. Post-Visit Interviewing: Recorded, semi-structured interviews are an instrumental way to collect narrated stories about visitors' experiential engagement at attractions. Visitors explain their reactions, such as why they were averse to commercial saturation or why they chose to engage new forms of religious practice. These interviews can produce surprising results. For example, Kaell discovered that in their narratives Holy Land pilgrims nearly erase their fellow travelers from the pilgrimage experience in favor of the land itself.⁴⁴ Two important questions to consider with these interviews are when to conduct them and whether to do them one-on-one or in groups. Do you want an immediate reflection or a reflection that has marinated in the visitor's memory? Do you want individual reflections or the collaborative reflections of small groups who visited an attraction together?

2. Elicitation Devices: Post-visit interviewing can be enhanced by the use of material items and representations from the Bible-based attraction that will ignite memory and storytelling (e.g., natural objects collected from the land, commodity items purchased as souvenirs or gifts, guiding materials, and photographs or videos taken at the attraction). In her reflection interviews, Kaell used albums of photographs taken and assembled by pilgrims. With this elicitation device she discovered that the erasure of fellow pilgrims in favor of biblical landscapes was not just a discursive pattern but also evident in what photographs pilgrims chose to take, keep, and display.

CODA

In this article I have explored a range of analytical issues and questions that ethnographers can use to understand the process of consuming Bible-based attractions. And, I have proposed specific data collection methods for each of three consumption stages. Ultimately, any analysis of Bible-based attractions informs general study of Christian leisure and travel. The study of consumption at these destinations also engages broader trends in the interdisciplinary study of religious practices and theological formation.

Bible-based attractions reflect the well established turn toward lived religion that began in the 1980s.⁴⁵ This turn sought to recognize the significance of popular, unauthorized, and contested spaces in the making of religious identity and community. By following believers far outside the confines of officially sanctioned religious spaces and activities, lived religion argued against any discrete division of sacred-profane. The imprint of this turn continues to be felt as religion scholars explore the varied expressions of religious tourism and pilgrimage. For example, Thomas Bremer highlights the mutual exchanges that occur

between commodity value, aesthetic value, and religious value.⁴⁶ Many of the same dynamics at work in these intersecting journeys are also evident in travel to Bible-based attractions, which itself can be discussed in terms of tourism or pilgrimage.

Bible-based attractions also reflect the more recent media turn in the study of religion, which shifts the analytical center of gravity to the forms and processes of religious mediation.⁴⁷ The media turn's central theoretical conceit is that mediation is constitutive of religious worlds, not simply a byproduct. Religious actors use different materials forms – from physical objects to technological apparatuses and the human sensorium – to shape religious experience, learning, and communication. Through material mediation, adherents confront and seek to resolve the central problems that animate their religious tradition(s), such as authority, belonging, and presence. The media turn puts to rest tired ideologies that resist, doubt, or deny that religious life is anything less than fundamentally entangled in life's gritty and polished materialities. Bible-based attractions provide a focused genre of destination to address questions of material mediation.

The analytical lure of Bible-based attractions owes to their refractive quality as they simultaneously redirect our attention to tourism, pilgrimage, lived religion, and material mediation. It is a definitively hybrid species, integrating religion and entertainment, piety and play, fun and faith, commerce and devotion, pleasure and education. The resulting complexity makes Bible-based attractions utterly fascinating, but can also make them difficult to apprehend methodologically. With this article, I hope to have made them more apprehensible, but certainly no less fascinating.

ENDNOTES

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2 Coleman, Simon and John Elsner. 2004. Tradition as Play: Pilgrimage to “England’s Nazareth.” *History and Anthropology* 15(3): 273-88.

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Devotion: Evangelical Performance in 21st Century America. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press; Wharton, Annabel Jane. 2006. *Selling Jerusalem: Relics, Replicas, Theme Parks*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. For exceptions to the lack of research on consumption, see Simon Coleman's work on the Marian site of Walsingham is a distinct exception and a book published just before I completed final revisions of this manuscript. Patterson, Sara M. 2016. *Middle of Nowhere: Religion, Art, and Pop Culture at Salvation Mountain*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.

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5 For a creationist account of such visits, see: <https://answersingenesis.org/blogs/ken-ham/2009/08/08/the-day-285-atheists-agnostics-visited-the-creation-museum/>; For a skeptic account: <http://www.skepticblog.org/2012/03/07/a-visit-to-the-creation-museum/>

6 Coleman and Elsner 2004: 280-82

7 Eade, John and Michael Sallnow (eds.). 1991. *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage*. London: Routledge.

8 For an online curation of these attractions, see www.materializingthebible.com. The N of 218 is current as of this article's 2016 publication, however new attractions are added to the site when located.

9 Bielo, James S. 2009. *Words Upon the Word: An Ethnography of Evangelical Group Bible Study*. New York: NYU Press.

10 Israel, England, Philippines, China, Taiwan, Netherlands, Canada, Germany, Argentina, Ireland, Brazil, Scotland, Mexico, Australia, Bahamas, India, Italy, Poland, Czech Republic, Bosnia, New Zealand, Portugal, Denmark, Croatia, Hungary, Japan, Kenya, and Latvia.

11 Bielo, James S. 2015. *Literally Creative: Intertextual Gaps and Artistic Agency*. In *Scripturalizing the Human: the written as the political*, edited by Vincent L. Wimbush, 20-34. New York: Routledge

12 https://answersingenesis.org/ministry-news/ark-encounter/ark-encounter-estimated-to-attract/?utm_source=cmnews&utm_medium=email&utm_content=button&utm_campaign=20150605&mc_cid=5c9505908a&mc_eid=cbe2631d83 (accessed: October 30, 2015)

13 For a demonstration of this processual model, see: Kaell 2014.

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21 For the circulation of conspiracy discourse in the creationist movement, see: Butler 2010

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23 Kaell 2014: 74-75

24 Ibid: 61; cf. Pena, Elaine A. 2011. *Performing Piety: Making Sacred Space with the Virgin of Guadalupe*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

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26 Coleman 2004: 53

27 Ibid: 60

28 Coleman and Elsner 2004: 279

29 Cf. Stausberg, Michael. 2011. *Religion and Tourism: Crossroads, Destinations, and Encounters*. New York: Routledge, 193-218.

30 Feldman, Jackie. 2007. Constructing a Shared Bible Land: Jewish Israeli guiding performances for Protestant pilgrims. *American Ethnologist* 34(2): 351-374.

31 Ibid: 362.

32 Coleman and Elsner 2004: 281

33 Pena 2011

34 Kaell 2014

35 This account is based on the author's visit to the site in March 2014. An earlier version of this section was published on Anderson Blanton's curated digital scholarship project, *The Materiality of Prayer*, in May 2014.

36 Blanton, Anderson. 2015. *Hittin' the Prayer Bones: Materiality of Spirit in the Pentecostal South*. Chapel Hill: UNC Press.

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38 Coleman 2004: 61; cf. 57, 62

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40 Shoval, Noam and Isaacson, Michal. 2007. *Tracking Tourists in the Digital Age*. *Annals of Tourism Research* 34(1): 141-159.

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42 Bielo, James S. 2011. *Emerging Evangelicals: faith, modernity, and the desire for authenticity*. New York: NYU Press.

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