

Chapter One

BIBLICAL RECREATION

*Holy Land USA
Bedford County, Virginia*

My family and I were sitting toward the back of the second of two flatbed trailers that were hitched together and snaking along a winding dirt road behind an old boxy four-wheel-drive pickup. The trailer-truck combination had been converted from something distinctly farmy to a relatively comfortable open-air touring train. Each of the flatbeds was covered by a corrugated metal roof and had two rows of padded school bus seats bolted to its wooden floor.

We were coming to the end of Journey Trail, the three-mile loop road through the foothills of Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains that takes visitors to the various exhibits of Holy Land USA, a roughly 1:100 scale replication of the land of the Bible during the time of Jesus. This not-for-profit, nondenominational ministry runs solely on donations, hosting more than twenty-five thousand visitors per year—as many as five hundred on a Saturday during peak season. Most come in church groups from Virginia or North Carolina. We were sharing our tour along Journey Trail with a group from an African-American church in North Carolina—forty women plus the bus driver and two husbands.

Our truck driver, Mike, was also our tour guide. An energetic, warm-hearted, forty-something family man, he lives and works on the property of Holy Land USA along with his wife, eight daughters,

Roadside Religion

and five sons. He keeps the animals, repairs the trucks, maintains the trails, and gives guided tours.

At key points along the way, Mike would stop the truck, hop out, strap on his portable sound system (a small amplifier and handheld mike that reminded me of one of those Mr. Microphones from the 1970s), and give us a minilecture on our current virtual location, be it the stable where Jesus was born, Joseph's woodworking shop, or the Dome of the Rock.

As we lurched to a stop along the dirt road near an old wooden building labeled "Upper Room," a woman seated in the row ahead of us called out, "Where *are* we?" She and her fellow traveler had been talking about their church group's long bus ride that morning, during which they had lost track of how far they'd come.

I was about to answer that we were in Bedford County, Virginia, when our tour guide climbed onto the flatbed and declared in a booming voice, "Jerusalem!"

"What did he say?" the woman asked her friend, scowling in confusion.

Another woman a few rows ahead looked back over her shoulder and repeated with a smile, "Jerusalem. He said we're in Jerusalem."

"Amen." Several other women nodded. "That's right. We're in Jerusalem now!"

Re-creating the Sacred

There is a deep desire within many of us to inhabit our sacred stories, to re-create sacred space and time in the here and now and to live into it with all our heart, mind, and strength. We want to make sacred space and time present. This desire to re-create the sacred—let's call it religious recreation—is a kind of *nostalgia*, homesickness (from ancient Greek *nostos*, "returning home," plus *algia*, "pain"), a

longing to have our everyday lives set within the horizon of a sacred story. And in the process to re-create and reconsecrate ourselves and our contemporary world, in which it feels as though our sense of connection with the sacred is always being worn away by the pressures of everyday life. In this respect, religious recreation is something more than our word “recreation” has come to mean. Religious recreation is both the re-creation of the sacred past in the present and the re-creation of the self as sacred. In re-creating time and space as sacred, we re-create ourselves as sacred.

We can see this desire for religious recreation expressed in many ways within traditional Jewish and Christian religion. Local Jewish temples and synagogues, for example, replicate architectural features of the Jerusalem Temple, believed to be founded by God upon the foundation stone of the cosmos; and the makeshift booths built during Succoth replicate the temporary dwellings in which the Israelites lived while wandering in the wilderness. Likewise, Communion tables in Christian churches replicate the table of the Last Supper, Jesus’s final communal meal with his disciples.

We see this same kind of nostalgic desire to re-create sacred time and space in the various works of what I call *biblical recreation*: scale re-creations of the land of the Bible, or Jerusalem; life-size re-creations of Noah’s Ark or the Wilderness Tabernacle; and so on. Indeed, as historian and biblical scholar Burke O. Long shows in his remarkable *Imagining the Holy Land*, the practices of religious devotion to the Holy Land have deep historical roots in America, going back at least as far as the late nineteenth century. During that time, the combination of new archeological research in Palestine and the rise in popularity of travel narratives and picture books from the Middle East led to an explosion of public interest in the land of the Bible. What emerged was a form of religious devotion that Long, borrowing John Kirtland Wright’s term, calls *geopiety*, a deep reli-

Roadside Religion

gious devotion to a vision of the Holy Land concocted from a “curious mix of romantic imagination, historical rectitude, and attachment to physical space.” As Long takes pains to make clear, this “land of the Bible” that is the object of such geopietistic devotion is not an actual physical place, past or present. Rather it is a conceptual space, a product of religious devotion and imagination. It is the story world of the Bible placed like a template on the land of Palestine and Israel.

Since the late nineteenth century, American geopiety has found expression not only in popular books tracing the footsteps of Jesus but also in *biblical recreations*, life-size and scaled-down material reconstructions of places and sacred sites from the land of the Bible. One of the most well-known early examples is Palestine Park in Chautauqua, New York, which once included a life-size Tabernacle built to the specifications given in Exodus, a pyramid, a model of Jerusalem, and a small scale replica of the biblical Holy Land itself—complete with a ten-foot-long Dead Sea, a smaller Sea of Galilee, and markers for important biblical sites—landscaped into the rocky terrain of the shoreline of Lake Erie, which serves as the Mediterranean Sea. (Today, about all that remains of Palestine Park is the lakeside replica.) This American geopiety reached a turn-of-the-century entrepreneurial, evangelical, and patriotic peak with the Jerusalem exhibit at the St. Louis World’s Fair, which included an elaborate golden Tabernacle, the Dome of the Rock, and live performances.

Holy Land USA is very much part of this American tradition of geopietistic, imaginative practice of re-creating the land of the Bible—albeit in a far more homegrown form than either Chautauqua or the World’s Fair.

Like its historical predecessors, Holy Land USA has both private and public dimensions. On the one hand, this two-hundred-and-

fifty-acre biblical recreation is an expression of the personal religious desire of its founder, Bob Johnson, to re-create the sacred time and space of the biblical world. On the other hand, it is a venue for others to share that desire with him. A native of the nearby town of Bedford, Mr. Johnson and his son, Campbell, bought the property in 1972 after he retired from his general mercantile business in town. Campbell, who was in poor health and died soon after they closed the purchase, had wanted to preserve the land as a nature sanctuary, whereas Bob wanted to use it to create what he called a “biblical representation,” that is, a scale replica of the land of the Bible during the time of Jesus. Thus the subtitle of Holy Land USA on the sign at the main entrance, “A Nature Sanctuary,” which bears the desires of both father and son.

By all accounts a very sociable, funny, and generous spirit, Mr. Johnson had a deep and abiding fascination with the land of the Bible and spent the last two-and-a-half decades of his life creating this biblical representation. He made numerous trips to various sites of biblical significance in Israel, each time returning to build new displays on his property, Bible in one hand and tape measure in the other. Thus Holy Land USA is very much a material expression of his own deep desire to imagine and occupy the sacred time and space of the Bible.

On the other hand, Mr. Johnson was clearly motivated by a very public aim to host the same kind of religious desires in others, to provide a context for guests to take a leap of imagination and faith into the footsteps of Jesus. Indeed, he understood his work primarily as a ministry to the people of Bedford. Because most of them would never have the wherewithal to travel to the Holy Land themselves, he said, he wished to bring the Holy Land to them.

Mr. Johnson’s desire to host such a religious experience in others was contagious, as is evident from our tour guide Mike’s story of his

Roadside Religion

own calling to work there. Indeed, as he shared it with me, his is a call story worthy of the Gospels. He and his family had just moved into the Bedford area from Florida. Mr. Johnson, then in his eighties, knew everyone in town, and when he saw them enter the Golden Corral buffet one evening, he immediately recognized them as newcomers. He rose from his table, called them over from the other side of the room, and invited them to join him for dinner. By dessert, he had convinced them to move into a house on the Holy Land USA property and begin work within two weeks. Mike had been working there ever since, along with several other families who have continued the ministry since Mr. Johnson's death in 1999.

Story World

It is important to understand that Holy Land USA is not simply a re-creation of the land of Israel and Palestine, past or present. Rather, it is a material re-creation of the Gospel story drawn selectively from the Protestant Christian Bible. It is a *story world*, a narrative space. In it biblical narrative is given material form. Its geography is story-shaped, following the life of Jesus from the stable to the tomb, and beyond. The only road through this space, called Journey Trail, takes visitors on a one-way trip through the Gospel narrative: beginning in the south, in Bethlehem, where Jesus was born; then heading north to the Galilee region, where Jesus grew up and began his ministry; and then turning south and running down the west side of the Jordan river to Jerusalem, arriving finally at Calvary and the empty tomb.

Along Journey Trail there are a dozen or so exhibits, each representing the place of a particular biblical story. We might think of them as stages. But instead of live actors we find two-dimensional figures of biblical characters, cut with a jigsaw from plywood and

then painted with bright, contrasting colors. Jesus and Mary both sport halos.

What these figures lack in lifelikeness is more than made up for, it seems to me, in homemade authenticity, earnestness, and a kind of visual allure that's hard to put a finger on. Indeed, they reflect no intention to create realistic images of human beings. The eye-drawing power of these flat, two-dimensional, slightly out-of-proportion figures is more like that of traditional Christian icons. Staring past or through us, their hearts and minds appear to be elsewhere. They seem to be gazing through the world, their eyes fixed on a world beyond this one. As such they invite contemplation of the otherworldly.

Our first stop on the tour was a shepherd's cave built into a dirt mound. In the opening of the cave are several cutout figures: two sheep, a shepherd, an angel, and Joseph. This is a representation of the Gospel scene in which the angel Gabriel tells Joseph what's going on with Mary ("Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."). Mike pointed out that this cave construction is closer to the kind of stable in which Jesus was born than the typical small wooden shed one finds in most nativity scenes. As he talked to us, a couple of freshly shorn, real live sheep approached him expectantly, and he fed them a handful of something. Like any good shepherd, Mike knew them by name.

As we continued north on the Jericho Road leg of Journey Trail, along the Jordan River valley, Mike added a little drama to the experience. Reminding us of the Good Samaritan story, he pointed out that such roads in ancient times were prime locations for robbers, who would ambush vulnerable travelers. "But I don't think we need to worry today. No one would dare come after a tough-looking

Roadside Religion

bunch like ours!” Everyone chuckled along with him, clearly enjoying the ride and happy to participate in the virtual experience.

A hundred yards or so beyond the shepherd’s cave stands a strange contraption composed of old metal wagon wheels, saw blades, plowshares, gears, a milk can, and sundry other farm antiques. About ten feet tall, it looks like a cross between an old tractor and a very dangerous piece of playground equipment. On it is a sign that reads HEROD’S IDOL, along with Bible verses warning against idolatry and covetousness. This odd piece, Mike explained, is Mr. Johnson’s rather fanciful representation of King Herod’s hunger for power and his fear of the baby Jesus, whom he learned about from the three wise men. Behind it is an armored figure in a chariot pointed back down Journey Trail toward the shepherd’s cave, from whence we had come. With a slight stretch of imagination, it’s a centurion off to fulfill Herod’s desperate order to slaughter all children under two in and around Bethlehem. On the ground nearby were several old millstones, references to Jesus saying that it would be better for a man to be tossed into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck than for him to offend a child.

At the northernmost point along Journey Trail is a collection of buildings set around a miniature Sea of Galilee, representing the region of ancient Palestine in which Jesus was raised and began his ministry. Encircled by a narrow gravel road, the glassy-surfaced sea is a disturbingly Day-Glo blue-green. The sign on its southernmost shore pleads, WILL YOU HELP US SAVE THE SEA? This is not a biblical reference. Since the county ran a new power line along a nearby ridge a few years ago, the sea has been in ecological crisis. Its water levels are dropping and its algae levels are rising. Unable to influence the local powers that be, Holy Land USA has launched a “Save the Sea” campaign to raise money to clean the pond and restore it to its original holiness.

Just south of the Sea of Galilee there is a smaller pond and a rocky trail leading up to a substantial stone-walled building with a log roof. This is the carpentry workshop of Joseph and Jesus. Inside, standing at a long rustic wooden slab table and surrounded by antique plows, saws, and other old farm equipment are Joseph and a preteen Jesus. Off to the side, in the background, Mary watches father and son adoringly, no doubt pondering it all in her heart.

Anticipating the question on all our minds, Mike hastened to explain all the farm equipment. Socioeconomic life in most of Palestine during the time of Jesus was primarily rural and agricultural. Although different from the tools used way back then, the preindustrial farm equipment interspersed throughout Holy Land USA is meant to remind people of the historical distance between modern American society and that first-century world. I suspect that for many visitors, consciously or not, it also evokes a certain distinctly American nostalgia for this nation's own mythic beginnings of life on the frontier.

On the north end of the sea, close to the shore, is Peter's house, built much like Joseph's workshop but smaller. Before Jesus called him, Peter was a fisherman, here represented by two large fish painted on the front of his house. Between the house and the water is an entirely seaworthy aluminum rowboat resting on blocks. On the one hand, this adds to the fisherman theme. On the other hand, it no doubt provides a practical means for Holy Land USA personnel to take to the sea whenever the call comes, whether to scoop algae or to save a drowning tourist.

Also near the sea, among some trees just to the south, is Cana, where Jesus made a splash at a local wedding party by turning water into wine. Here Cana is represented by a large concrete pad, poured in the shape of a cross, along which several dozen concrete blocks have been arranged in rows for seating. Mike told me that wedding



Zacchaeus, Holy Land USA

ceremonies are often held here. Given the conservative evangelical orientation of this place, I doubt there's much wine flowing at them.

Departing Galilee, the road turns south and runs along the west side of the Jordan valley toward Jerusalem. On the way, I spied another cutout figure standing on the branch of a tree. It was Zacchaeus, the little man of ill-gotten riches who climbed a sycamore tree to see Jesus as he passed by. "Come down," Jesus commanded, "for

today I must abide at thy house,” after which Zacchaeus gave half of his riches to the poor and repaid those he had cheated fourfold (Luke 19). There are lots of sycamores in Holy Land USA, and Mr. Johnson took care to place him in one. However, I suspect his prime trailside location was more important than finding him the biblically correct tree species.

As we passed Zacchaeus in our little rolling tour, I wondered why he had been included in the Gospel story world we were traversing. It occurred to me that in relation to him, we would be part of Jesus’s entourage. We were leaving Jesus’s hometown with our faces set toward Jerusalem. He was looking on from the side of the road as we passed. Yet, on another level, we were expected to identify *with* Zacchaeus, trying to catch a glimpse of this man Jesus, to wrest a blessing, to have an encounter with the holy one of Israel.

Just before entering Jerusalem we made a stop at the Dome of the Rock, on Mount Moriah, where Abraham nearly sacrificed Isaac, and where Solomon later began building the Temple. A safety-railed footpath leads to the memorial Dome set atop a large rock mound. Surrounded by blue pillars made of painted oil drums, the centerpiece of the structure is a retired water tower. Openings have been cut through its thick steel wall, and inside is the Ark of the Lord, a wooden box, painted gold, topped with two jigsawed wings and the two tablets of the Ten Commandments.

“Amazing!” the older gentleman next to me exclaimed as we stood before the Ark. He turned to me and asked pointedly, “How did they come up with that?”

I wasn’t entirely sure who he meant by “they.” At first I thought he was referring to Mr. Johnson and his hired hands cutting through the thick wall of that water tank to put the Ark inside. But then I remembered that during Mike’s opening welcome remarks, he had introduced me to the rest of the group as a biblical scholar. This man

Roadside Religion

was asking me how the ancient Israelites “came up with that.” For him, this wooden winged box and blow-torched water tower encircled by oil drums evoked the real thing. Not that he thought it was an entirely realistic representation, but it put him in the mind of the ancient Israelite Ark and tablets, and he saw this as an opportunity to ask someone who might know more.

“I really don’t know,” I said, shaking my head apologetically.

Next to the path leading up to the Dome is a neatly arranged stack of wood, recalling Abraham’s near sacrifice of his son. GOD WILL PROVIDE THE LAMB, a nearby sign reads. Which is what Abraham told Isaac when he asked where the sacrificial animal was. But here I saw no ram caught in any nearby thicket. This might seem a serious omission, but I suspect it’s intentional. In the evangelical Christian context of Holy Land USA, this absence refers visitors farther up the road to Calvary, where it is believed that God provided the ultimate sacrifice.

Not Quite There

“Amen. That’s right. We’re in Jerusalem now!” So we were. As we came down the valley into the Jerusalem area of Holy Land USA, the collective excitement of our group was palpable. All understood that this would be the culmination of the tour and of the story, in which we were participating as we moved along Journey Trail. We were approaching the salvific destination, the virtual heartland of the Christian faith, the place of Crucifixion and Resurrection. For many in our group, our kids included, Bedford County was less real than the Holy City itself.

Clover and I, however, were not quite there. We found ourselves unable to be fully present to this experience. On the one hand, we each have histories within evangelical circles that allowed us to



Empty Tomb, Holy Land USA

identify with our tour guide and travel companions. On the other hand, we no longer run in those circles, and that made us feel very much as outsiders.

As I mentioned earlier, I was raised with a strong sense of identity within conservative evangelical Christianity. Although I no longer identify with it, my childhood and teen years were steeped in that culture. You might say it remains a part of me even though I'm no longer a part of it.

Clover's religious background and experience left her, too, with one foot in the world of Holy Land USA and the other well outside it. Raised in a nonreligious family, she started attending a tiny "Bible-believing" Assembly of God church on the edge of her trailer park when she was eight years old. Her perfect attendance in Sunday school during that first year won her a scholarship to summer church camp. Over the years this little community of very loving and nur-

Roadside Religion

turing charismatic Christians became her home away from home and instilled in her a deep and abiding sense of identity as a loved child of God. When she went to college she lost touch with that little much-beloved community, but she remained heavily involved in similar (though somewhat less charismatic and less homespun) conservative evangelical Christian circles. It wasn't until she felt called to ordained ministry that she became alienated from those circles, in which the ordination of women is strongly opposed. Her sense of calling, along with an emerging feminist consciousness and orientation toward theologies of liberation, led her to break from that culture and hitch herself to the more progressive Presbyterian Church (USA).

Clover and I fell in love toward the end of college, in a philosophy of religion course, and within a couple years we were married and attending a Presbyterian seminary. As we've continued on our particular but closely entwined spiritual paths, I'd have to say that we've only grown more distant from our evangelical backgrounds. And yet, that particular and peculiar form of American Christianity remains very much a part of each of us. Like the Hotel California, you can check out any time you want but you can never really leave. It's in our blood. Its language, laced with phrases from the King James Bible and other classic Christian texts, constantly slips into our discourse—often in contexts where no one else hears it. It's our idiom, the theological pool in which our religious imaginations live and move and have their being. It's part of us, although we're no longer part of it. We're of its world but not in it.

Thus, on one level, we identified with our tour guide and travel companions. We knew the religious language and symbolism, understood the theological context, and we caught all the biblical references. On the other hand, we are no longer part of that tradition. Hearing it all as former insiders, defectors with no hard feelings, we

responded with heartfelt appreciation for the sincerity of this world of experience but also with a distancing sense of irony and ambiguity. Reminded of the rich young ruler who sadly walked away from Jesus's calling, we felt a certain lonely unease at our incapacity to become part of the story with our travel companions.

Holy City

In Jerusalem proper, the main exhibit is an old two-story wooden building. Before the property was purchased for Holy Land USA, it had been the site of a government-operated still, and this building, near the stream (now known as the Jordan River), was the main base of operation. Now it's the Upper Room, where Jesus and his disciples shared a Passover Seder meal (the Last Supper) shortly before he was arrested and executed. Upstairs is a long table with thirteen stools, along with a Plexiglas-encased diorama of the scene of the Last Supper. Above the door, thirty coins with holes drilled through them are screwed to a sign to form a circle. Revealing a certain ironic sense of humor as it refers to the building's past and present significance, the words inside the circle read,

BETRAYAL
\$TILL, A\$ OF OLD.
MEN BY THEM\$ELVES ARE PRICED.
FOR 30 PIECES
JUDA\$ \$OLD, HIM\$ELF.
NOT CHRIST.

(Notice there's no dollar sign in the name of Christ.)

Behind the still/Upper Room is the narrow trail marked by another sign:

Roadside Religion

VIA DOLOROSA

THE SORROWFUL WAY

THE ROUTE WHICH OUR LORD TRAVELED FROM THE

JUDGMENT SEAT OF PILATE,

TO THE PLACE OF HIS CRUCIFIXION ON MT. CALVARY.

MATT. 27:26-31

This Via Dolorosa, which has been modified to include a hand-operated mechanical conveyer for those who find this via too dolorous on foot, leads to a small flat area at the base of three tall, rough-hewn wooden crosses. Another narrow trail leads down and away from these crosses to a tomb cut into the rock beneath them. Inside is nothing but a wide stone bed, empty of course, illuminated by a single fluorescent light mounted into the rock ceiling.

Most of our fellow travelers milled about the Cross and empty tomb with apparent reverence. Everyone entered the tomb to see the empty stone bed for her- or himself. Mike didn't rush us. He left the Mr. Microphone in the truck and waited quietly among the trees near another large seating area of neatly arranged blocks. Clearly, he was used to visitors lingering at this place for a long time.

Clover and I noticed that one older woman remained at the foot of the central cross far longer than anyone else, while her daughter stood patiently by. She kneeled low to the ground, still, silent, eyes wide open and fixed on the foot of the Cross. Later on, back on the trailer, her daughter explained to Clover that she'd been going through a very difficult time in her life. There, facing the Cross, she had become suddenly overwhelmed by what Jesus had done for her. It was like she had been transported to the time and place of Jesus's Crucifixion. She was there.

Indeed, she wasn't the only one to have such an experience at Calvary that day. As Mike's truck pulled us down the last quarter

mile of Journey Trail, away from Jerusalem and toward the bookstore and parking lot, the mood among our fellow travelers was one of solemn reflection.

Making It Real

Over the course of the tour, a remarkable transformation had occurred for many on board. They had become part of the story world of Holy Land USA. It had, in a very profound way, become real.

Granted, Holy Land USA is far from geographically or historically “realistic” in the common sense of the term. It doesn’t realistically represent either the geography of Palestine and Israel or the historical world of first-century Judea during the time of Jesus. And yet, for many of our fellow travelers, it had become *profoundly, phenomenally real*. But “real” in a sense very different from what we mean by empirically or objectively real. Real, rather, in the sense of being religiously real, an experience of ultimate reality. Real in the sense that one feels as though one has become a part of it. As though one has lost oneself in it. For the woman at the foot of the Cross, as for many others, normal, everyday time and space had been suspended, and the story world of Holy Land USA had become reality. She was *there*.

What made this possible? How did Holy Land USA succeed in hosting such a religious experience for so many? How did it become religiously real? I see three particular ways by which Holy Land USA works to create an experience of the “real” for its visitors: first, its rhetoric of accuracy; second, its narrative arrangement of space; and third, its creation of a wilderness experience. Let me say a bit about each of these in turn.

First, Holy Land USA succeeded in making itself religiously real to visitors by deploying an extensive *rhetoric of accuracy* and histori-

Roadside Religion

cal realism. Mike frequently referred to the ratios used for laying out the land as a scaled-down version of the Holy Land, and on several occasions he mentioned that Bob Johnson had taken great care to locate and build all his exhibits according to the exact measurements he had taken from the original sites in Israel. And there were signs that reiterated Mike's points. Near Calvary and the empty tomb, for example, one sign read

CALVARY — EMPTY TOMB
THESE ARE JUST AS REALISTIC
AS IF YOU WERE ACTUALLY THERE.

Mike also cited the testimonies of former tourists, ministers, and biblical scholars who had visited the actual site in Israel and who verified that this display is a most accurate representation. Indeed, Mike said that several visitors had told him that this display was actually *better* than the original because the original was so overrun with tourists, security guards, and gift shops. The implication was that this copy is in some sense *more real* than the original, that is, more directly available to experience.

The rhetoric of accuracy and realism is important for creating this experience of the “real” Holy Land here. But more important, I think, is its *narrative arrangement of space*. As mentioned earlier, this is a story-shaped world, an inhabitable story. Guests don't rove the area at will. There is a beginning and an end to their experience of this space. Journey Trail is a one-way trip that walks or drives guests through a certain version of the story of Jesus, from birth to ministry to death to Resurrection. As guests progress through the space of Holy Land USA, then, they also progress through the Gospel story that is mapped onto it. As they go deeper into the space, they go

deeper into the story. By the time they arrive at Jerusalem, the Gospel narrative and Journey Trail have converged into a single sacred story world, and they have become part of it.

In this respect, Holy Land USA may be understood as something of an American evangelical form of pilgrimage, what anthropologists of religion Victor and Edith Turner describe in *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* as “a complex surrogate for the journey to the source and heartland of the faith.” Indeed, it is strikingly similar to traditional European Catholic pilgrimage sites. As with those sites, Holy Land USA was created so that locals of modest means could experience the land of the Bible, especially Jerusalem, without needing to travel abroad. And as with those traditional pilgrimages, the experience here is treated as a kind of individual rite of initiation. Because, as Mike puts it, “Christian faith has its roots in Israel,” it is believed that every Christian should make this transformative journey of faith to the heart of the Holy Land. Even if she takes the journey as part of a group, moreover, she ultimately faces Calvary alone. Finally, as with traditional Catholic pilgrimages, toward the end of the journey (in this case Jerusalem), the pilgrim encounters a concentration of sacred objects and symbolic structures (e.g., Upper Room, Calvary, empty tomb, prolific signage). Thus, as the pilgrim reaches the culmination of the journey, her own subjectivity is increasingly enveloped in the sacred world, signifying her newfound freedom from the mundane order of the everyday, profane world.

In this light, we might see Holy Land USA as a kind of return of the repressed within American evangelicalism, which has tended to define itself over against Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity by avoiding, if not outright condemning, all forms of material religion, ritual embodiment, and sacramental theology. Indeed, Protestant tradition has been particularly critical of pilgrimage. The great

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Protestant theologian and father of the Reformation John Calvin frequently referred to pilgrimage as one of the most egregious examples of the corruption of Roman Catholicism by its priesthood. In chapter thirteen of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, he reckoned it as a form of idolatry on account of its attachment to material things, “not only empty and nugatory, but full of manifest impiety,” a form of “fictitious worship” abhorred by God.

As deeply Protestant as it is, Holy Land USA is nonetheless a kind of pilgrimage space, speaking to a certain desire to inhabit and traverse the sacred story, to encounter the holy in material form, and thereby to experience a kind of biblical literacy quite different from the kind preached from the pulpits of evangelical churches and studied in Friday prayer breakfasts at Denny’s. Here is a form of biblical literacy that must be embodied, and that requires one to come to an experience of certain material objects and spaces as sacramental.

Part of what makes Holy Land USA work, I think, has to do with the tension that exists within this place between the *rhetoric* of accuracy and realism, discussed earlier, and the highly *unrealistic* and *historically inaccurate* objects and spaces one sees everywhere. Recall the nineteenth-century farm equipment, the prevalence of concrete, the oil drums and water tank, the still, and, above all, the two-dimensional plywood cutout figures that populate nearly every site. None of this jibes with the continual assertions of realism. Yet, as the traveler moves through the space and therefore through the biblical narrative mapped onto it, she forgets or at least overlooks their anachronicity and flatness. They are accepted as real. What is initially seen as unrealistic eventually comes to conform to what is *said* by Mike and the various signs, thanks to the *narrative development* of the traveler’s experience as she moves through this space. In this respect, the unrealism of objects like the cutout figures is, paradoxically, important to the process of coming to experience of the “real”

Holy Land in this place. We might compare this dynamic to the theater experience, in which a degree of unreality is important to the audience's imaginative participation in the story world of the play. The experience of theatrical drama as real often depends on more or less unrealistic stagecraft: a stage, two-dimensional facades and other backdrops, makeup, and costuming. As the narrative drama progresses, the audience becomes less and less aware of that lack of realism. At the same time they become less and less aware of the distance between them and their everyday world on the one hand and the actors and their story world on the other.

The affective experience of the really real at Holy Land USA works, then, as a result of its *disarrangement* of expected meanings: its placement of preindustrial plows and tractor wheels in Joseph's workshop; or its placement of the Upper Room in a whiskey still; its placement of biblical Israel and Calvary in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. All of these are disarrangements as much as arrangements. They don't sit well at the beginning of the journey. They "cross conceptual wires," as Clifford Geertz puts it in his essay on "Deep Play," so that "phenomena . . . are clothed in signifiers which normally point to other referents." Yet as the story and the tour progress, the disarrangement opens the possibility of a new arrangement, one that allows travelers a truly novel experience, namely, an experience of the Holy Land.

There is, I think, a third means by which this place lends itself to such profound religious experiences among its visitors. It has to do with its subtitle, "A Nature Sanctuary." Let's call it the *wilderness experience* of Holy Land USA.

On first blush it seems odd to put the land of the Bible among the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. That part of the country is not exactly reminiscent of Israel-Palestine, past or present. Seeing a creek trickling around large mossy boulders beneath white oaks

Roadside Religion

and tall mountain pines doesn't quite call the Jordan River to mind. And spying a white-tailed deer just behind an old whiskey still doesn't quite recall the Last Supper in the Upper Room.

Yet, in another sense, it all works. The ecological disconnect between this natural landscape and that of the Middle East doesn't present itself as an obstacle for visitors. I think that this is the case because this setting does something else for guests, something ultimately more important for hosting their religious experience. That is, it removes them from their day-to-day life and places them in a wilderness context.

In fact, the wilderness excursion has deep significance within biblical religious tradition. There the wilderness figures as a chaotic, unformed place of new beginnings. Think of Moses, Elijah, David, and Jesus. Each returns from the wilderness transformed, ready to take on new lives of leadership in the community. Think as well of the Israelites themselves, who leave Egypt and enter the wilderness as a band of runaway Hebrew slaves and eventually enter the Promised Land as God's chosen nation. Think too of the early monks who went into the wilderness to purge themselves of worldly concerns and purify their lives for devotion to God. And, stretching a little (not far) beyond traditional religion into the less explicitly religious traditions of American romanticism, think of Jack London and countless American nature writers for whom the wilderness signifies a place of personal transformation and rebirth. Like the waters of chaos from which the world was born, the wilderness is a locus of potential, a place of fecund depth.

The nature sanctuary aspect of Holy Land USA, then, is not simply a nod to the will of Mr. Johnson's late son. Rather, it provides visitors with a kind of otherworldly "wilderness experience" that becomes the context for bringing about a deeper, more "real," more powerfully transformative religious encounter.

As wilderness experience and as pilgrimage, Holy Land USA may be understood in terms of what religionists call a liminal phenomenon. Liminal, from the Latin *limen*, basically means “threshold.” Religious anthropologist Arnold van Gennep developed the concept of the liminal in religious ritual to describe times and spaces of transition from one state to another, threshold experiences such as rites of passage. Although not “liminal” in the full sense developed by van Gennep, Holy Land USA is something of a “symbolic and spatial area of transition,” as he puts it. As it is traversed within the ritual process of the tour, it is intended to bring about a personal transformation in the pilgrim/tourist, so that she exits that space a new person, having seen the Holy Land, having been there at the foot of the Cross, and having witnessed the stone rolled away from the empty tomb.

Ascension

Earlier I indicated that Journey Trail ends at the empty tomb. That’s not exactly right. A few hundred yards south of Jerusalem, just before visitors return to the bookstore and parking lot, the tour makes another stop near a large grassy hill. Lying along its carefully mown face is a huge cross made of white painted boulders. On one side, written in large concrete blocks, are the words, *MT. OLIVET*, and on the other side are the words, *JESUS ASCENDED / ACTS — I*. Here is Holy Land USA’s version of the place of Christ’s ascension. But look a little more closely at the grassy area at the top of the hill. You’ll notice several other large stones. These spell nothing. They are grave-stones. People are buried up there. That’s right, you can be baptized in the Jordan, get married in Cana, and be buried on Mount Olivet. Apparently some have had a real enough experience to decide they want to rest here, in this Holy Land, the virtual land of their biblical

Roadside Religion

ancestors. Now, on first blush, making Mount Olivet into a burial ground may not seem to jibe with the ascension theme. Yet for those who confess the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting, what better place to lie in wait for the Second Coming than where Christ went up the first time around? “Amen.”

Clover and I weren't about to purchase a family plot. But as we rolled past, we understood how others might.