

NARRATING THE PRESENT PAST

We often like to quote and paraphrase John Donne's famous statement from 1624:

"No man is an island, entire of itself,
every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main."

This is true both on macro and micro levels (for example, global economy and family), both for physical and spiritual worlds (global warming and the coming of the Messiah), both for the past and present (African slavery and the Internet). Unfortunately, time and again humans forget this simple but powerful truth which is made so obviously clear to us by watching daily news broadcasts. One such example can be found in the field of ancient history - in how we teach it and particularly in how we display it.

PANEL 1: *By the Rivers of Babylon* AN EXHIBITION AT BIBLE LANDS MUSEUM Jerusalem



Photo: Ardon Bar-Hama

THE BABYLONIAN EXILE. Texts relevant to the period and ensuing events. In wall projection, a movie offers a personal story: Haggai, son of Ahiqam, child of the exiled Judeans in Babylon (4th generation).

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries witnessed the 'renaissance' of the ancient world, histories and cultures that were discovered and excavated after laying dormant for hundreds and thousands of years. The great imperialistic powers of this period made sure that everyone learned about the ancient past by ripping gates, temples, monuments and countless artefacts from their original birthplace (the Pyramids would also have been uprooted if they were any smaller), shipping them thousands of miles away and displaying them in their museums that built their fame and reputation as the result of these acquisitions.

Even today, the majority of museums around the world display their ancient artifacts in galleries divided into the cultures and regions they originate from such as Mesopotamia, Egypt, Persia, China and the Greco-Roman world. Often these galleries emphasize the most important, impressive and beautiful items that belong to a particular culture, while the culture takes a back seat. Many of these museums employ what I term "the Mona Lisa approach".

PANEL 2: *By the Rivers of Babylon*
AN EXHIBITION AT BIBLE LANDS MUSEUM Jerusalem



Photo: Ardon Bar-Hama

BABYLONIAN DESTRUCTION (587 BCE). Objects of destruction from Jerusalem and Judah. Ancient and modern artifacts—manuscripts, drawing, posters—are displayed side-by-side. Violence, pain and suffering throughout Judeo-Christian history to this very day. Haggai's story continues.

Millions of people visit The Louvre every year, often with the aim to see what is considered the greatest painting that humanity has ever produced, da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*. Their visit may not give them a wider understanding, or any acquaintance at all, about Leonardo as the painter, the painting itself or about the High Renaissance period in Italy. Instead just seeing the painting is an end in itself. For both the visitor and the museum this is "mission accomplished" – the former has seen the greatest painting ever and the latter has counted masses of tourists through its doors.

Accordingly, millions may have seen, heard or learned about the Codex Hammurabi, the Ishtar Gate, the Bust of Nefertiti, the Rosetta Stone, and the Temple of Dendur, since they are some of the most central items in their respective museums and a draw to so many visitors. On the other hand many of these visitors will learn very little about the cultures and histories that produced these marvelous items and even less about how they relate to our contemporary world. Alas, a single item tends to be viewed as a world in itself.

And this is simply not acceptable.

Every item is part and parcel of a culture, and every culture is part of the much larger story of humanity that spans hundreds and thousands of years. Every single item is a piece of the puzzle—a single piece does not make the puzzle—while the puzzle is not complete without all the pieces. However, this puzzle is ever expanding. Not only do we have to provide an overall understanding of the past, but we also need to connect it to our present. In short, the story that started with the emergence of *Homo sapiens* is still developing day by day.

PANEL 3: *By the Rivers of Babylon*
AN EXHIBITION AT BIBLE LANDS MUSEUM Jerusalem



Photo: Ardon Bar-Hama

JUDEAN LIVES IN BABYLONIAN EXILE. Five generations of one family tree — ancient texts and art, maps, a detailed model of a Judean settlement in a hypothetical Babylonian village. Haggai's story concludes.

I am not suggesting that the Codex Hammurabi and the Rosetta Stone should be marginalized. Far from it, they have to maintain their VIP status as a draw to many visitors, but these items cannot just be viewed in isolation. Instead they have to be a part of a much bigger story of the cultures that produced them, the story of the beauty and ugliness of human development from antiquity to the present, the story of our achievements, mistakes and milestones that continue to affect us to this very day.

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