

Evangelical Heritage and Public History: Bridging an Artificial Divide

Casey Haughin-Scasny

Exhibiting Evangelicalism: Commemoration and Religion's Presence of the Past by Devin C. Manzullo-Thomas. Boston and Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2022. 240 pages, 12 illus., hardcover, \$90; paperback, \$28.95.

The History of the Bible. Museum of the Bible, Washington, DC. Amy Van Dyke, Lead Curator of Exhibitions. Permanent exhibition. <https://www.museumofthebible.org/floor-4-the-history-of-the-bible>

Historian and archivist Devin C. Manzullo-Thomas's *Exhibiting Evangelicalism* is the first work dedicated to the history of evangelical history museums in the United States, standing as a call to action for public historians whose field has often ignored these museums because of their religious nature. This book tells a history of the public interpretation of conservative Protestant¹ religious pasts "in the hopes that public historians will learn from and about the distinctive ways in which a particular segment of America's faithful have crafted and deployed a usable past" (3). An installment in the series *Public History in Historical Perspective* from University of Massachusetts Press, *Exhibiting Evangelicalism* is a timely and necessary intervention for the discipline.

Manzullo-Thomas begins his inquiry in the 1930s with the Billy Sunday Home and concludes with Museum of the Bible (MOTB) in the present to argue that conservative Protestant Christians developed ideologies about preserving the past for various ends, and terms this practice the construction of "evangelical heritage" (3). Manzullo-Thomas deploys evangelical heritage as a conceptual framework, involving a collection of myths, traditions, and narratives about the past that are constructed, consumed, and disseminated in public spaces to represent who evangelicals are in the present and who they should be in the future. Manzullo-Thomas argues that for conservative Protestants, this evangelical heritage is both instrumental and inspirational, as well as ultimately a means to build community and contribute to the broader goal of conversion.

¹ In framing the work, Manzullo-Thomas refers to "conservative Protestant Christians" rather than evangelicals because "evangelicalism is best understood as not a coherent theological movement but a set of imagined communities" where heritage plays an important role that moves beyond the theological into the political and social, with their own distinct value systems of elevated importance including whiteness, masculinity, and capitalism.

The first chapter, “Inventing Evangelicalism,” frames the postwar era as a time of flux and heightened anxieties in which the past was a powerful tool “to achieve political, economic, and social ends” (26). From this environment, Manzullo-Thomas argues that conservative Protestants experimented with using the past for collective identity-fashioning in ways similar to state, federal, and local public history projects. Manzullo-Thomas gives particular attention to the relationship between the emerging “new evangelicalism” and the postwar culture of commemoration. Beginning with the Billy Sunday House, former home of celebrity evangelist Billy Sunday, Manzullo-Thomas identifies a symbiotic relationship of legitimization between the new evangelicals and Sunday’s legacy as represented by his wife, Helen. Manzullo-Thomas then examines Park Street Church and Boston’s Freedom Trail as a contemporaneous alternate usage of evangelical heritage. The church’s connections to early American history on the Freedom Trail legitimized the church as a vanguard of nationalism, with this history then utilized in conversion efforts. Significantly, Manzullo-Thomas demonstrates Park Street’s reliance on women to begin the tours and act as “hostesses” for visitors, consistent with labor divisions at the Sunday House. Although both sites were successful regionally, they did not catalyze new evangelicalism as a social movement; however, certain thematic aspects of the sites—including celebrity, misogyny, and nationalism—remain consistent throughout the following chapters.

In Chapters 2 and 3, “Reviving Evangelical Heritage” and “Experiencing Evangelical Heritage,” Manzullo-Thomas highlights the Billy Graham Center as another phase of evangelical heritage. Notably, the Center had more connections to the professional world of heritage management than its precedents. Graham’s team envisioned both an archive and an interactive space that would “stimulate evangelicalism,” much as other museums of the 1970s sought to make history “come alive” (81). Manzullo-Thomas places the debates that surrounded the creation of the Center in the context of broader issues within evangelicalism at the time, including the treatment of women and connections to Christian nationalism, demonstrating how the board behind the Center shaped an institution to provide legitimization for the new evangelical movement. Manzullo-Thomas argues that this period saw marginalized groups trying to gain stake in national histories, and the Center was an example of evangelical heritage’s role in this movement. The experiential aspects of the Center’s exhibits, including a “crusade theater” and a simulated heaven, were developed to their final stage by James Stambaugh, a graduate of the Cooperstown Graduate Program, leading Manzullo-Thomas to suggest that we locate the origins of the experiential turn in museums in Cooperstown’s mid-1960s curriculum.

Despite experiential interventions, the Center, as Manzullo-Thomas details, experienced middling success and he suggests that this may have influenced the development of the Billy Graham Library, discussed in Chapter 4, “Weaponizing Evangelical Heritage.” Although called a “library” to invoke authority and garner respect, evangelical theme park developers were recruited for its production while

museum professionals were not. Manzullo-Thomas places the shift from center to library in the development of the New Christian Right's ideology. This contextualization allows Manzullo-Thomas to conduct a thorough examination of the site's nostalgia for a specific vision of America as a white, southern, respectable, global power that not only encouraged a personal conversion from visitors, but also financial and political support to the Graham family and the New Christian Right.

In the final chapter, "Mainstreaming Evangelical Heritage at the Museum of the Bible," Manzullo-Thomas demonstrates how MOTB represents a culmination of evangelical heritage strategies. He concludes the book with a call to continue expanding both collective understanding of evangelicals as an imagined community and public historians' scrutiny of their own subjectivity. Manzullo-Thomas cautions that identifying biases in narrative creation as exclusive to evangelical heritage leaves us ignorant of our own "activist impulses." Although Manzullo-Thomas recognizes that "our goals are more socially progressive," he argues that "we too are pursuing visitor transformation" and questions the legitimacy of this action (176–7). He suggests that public historians prioritize exhibition frameworks that provide visitors with the tools to recognize the synthetic nature of history itself and how history-making occurs rather than favoring one specific narrative or interpretation. This is a broad theoretical project to introduce in the final three pages of the work and would have benefitted from further exploration, as well as an indication of its place in the literature as this concept is already well-established in the field.²

There are several significant contributions from Manzullo-Thomas in this work, such as his emphasis on the role of women in the development of evangelical heritage as well as his focus on the intersecting nature of race and Christian nationalism. Additionally, his expansion of the archive benefits the work greatly. His use of Yelp reviews in Chapter 4 to examine audience responses not found in institutional reports allows him to develop and strengthen his arguments about the success of the library. Perhaps most significantly, Manzullo-Thomas analyzes how evangelical heritage sites have partnered with major contractors that are used by secular institutions to develop state-of-the-art exhibitions, furthering their appeal to mass audiences and their perceived authority (one such contractor developed exhibitions for both MOTB and the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture). At times, the book suffers from poor editing (for example, one nearly identical paragraph is repeated three times throughout the work); but overall, the book will be an asset to scholars of religious and secular public history alike.

I agree that we as public historians must consider sites of evangelical heritage in our work, particularly MOTB for its ability to fit into the national landscape. I visited the museum in July of 2022 and found it impressive in terms of the quality of

² See Robert R. Weyeneth, "What I've Learned Along the Way: A Public Historian's Intellectual Odyssey," *The Public Historian* 36, no. 2 (May 2014): 9–25.

its presentation and concerning its interpretation of the past. I highlight here one example of exhibition design that demonstrates evangelical heritage's deployment of public history practices that leverage recognizable frameworks of objectivity to obscure subjective interpretations of the past.

On the fourth floor of MOTB, the permanent exhibition "The History of the Bible" features "over 600 fascinating artifacts" that "illustrate the remarkable history of the Bible."³ Among these objects is a scale replica of the Stele of Hammurabi, on which one of the world's first written code of laws is recorded (the original is in the Louvre Museum). The Stele is not the only large facsimile in the collection—other notable reproductions include the Rosetta Stone and Merneptah Stele. They serve as "eye-catching pivot points" in the exhibition space that align MOTB with more prestigious institutions that house the authentic objects; however, the objects themselves are reduced to "mute ambassadors of the land where Israel and the Bible originated."⁴ In addition to providing this legitimacy for MOTB, the Stele is an object that can be, and is, manipulated to make claims about the past that align with the goals of evangelical heritage but do not withstand basic scholarly inquiries.

The object's label, titled "Law 'Codes'" reads, "Lists of laws, or law 'codes,' shed light on ideals of justice in the ancient world. Many examples have been found in the ancient Near East." This initial introduction is unobjectionable. However, the text quickly devolves into half-truths and omissions about the Stele: "The Torah includes several law codes—in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. They share many similarities in structure and subject matter with Mesopotamian examples. One notable difference is the identity of the lawgiver; in Mesopotamia, the law comes from the king; in the Torah, the law is given by God through Moses."

The most glaring issue is in the final sentence of the label text; although Hammurabi is depicted giving the law, the Stele's inscription reveals he does so at behest of the gods.⁵ In addition, the relief at the top of the Stele shows Hammurabi standing before Shamash, the god of justice. There is some discrepancy in the scholarship over whether Hammurabi is represented receiving the laws themselves or the tools to enact divine justice.⁶ Regardless, the very iconography of the object tells a more complex story than the label allows. For a Mesopotamian viewer, the

3 "Floor 4: The History of the Bible," Museum of the Bible, <https://www.museumofthebible.org/floor-4-the-history-of-the-bible>.

4 Sarah F. Porter, "The Land of Israel and Bodily Pedagogy at the Museum of the Bible," in *The Museum of the Bible: A Critical Introduction*, ed. Jill Hicks-Keeton and Cavan W. Concannon (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2019), 130.

5 L.W. King translation of Hammurabi's Code.

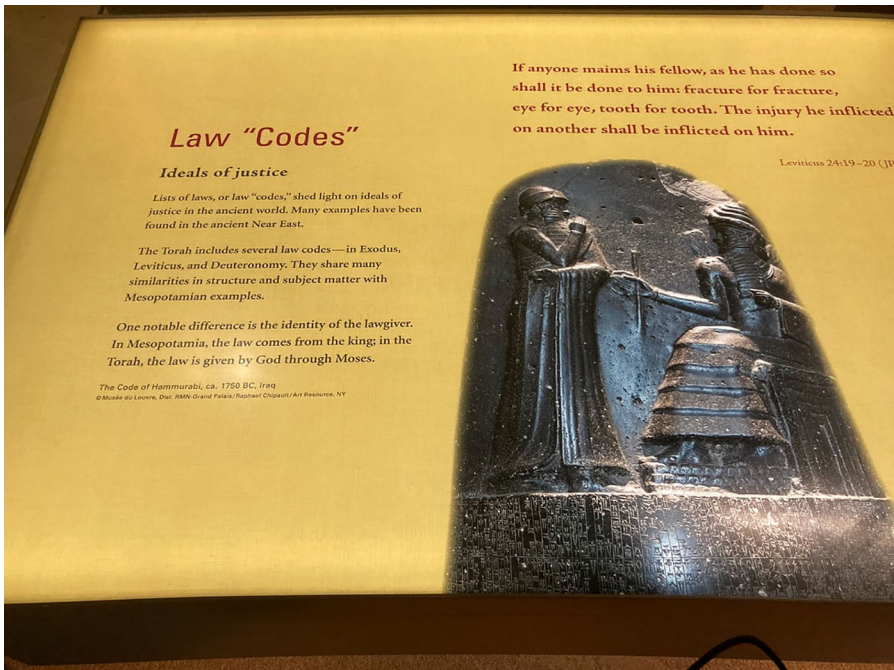
6 This argument is longstanding and complex within Near Eastern studies and cannot be fully unpacked here, but for more information on the object's iconography, see Rifat Sonsino, "Characteristics of Biblical Law," *Judaism* 33, no. 2 (1984): 202–9 and Marian H. Feldman, "Object Agency?: Spatial Perspective, Social Relations, and the Stele of Hammurabi," in *Agency and Identity in the Ancient Near East*, ed. Sharon R. Steadman and Jennifer C. Roos (New York: Routledge, 2016), 148–65.



Upper half of the Stele of Hammurabi facsimile in MOTB. (Photo by author)

law's legitimacy would be fundamentally defined by its relationship to divine authority.

Further, although MOTB states that the Torah's law codes "share many similarities in structure and subject matter" with the Mesopotamian ones, it does not also note that the Mesopotamian codes, particularly those on the Stele, significantly



Corresponding label for the Stele of Hammurabi facsimile in MOTB. (Photo by author)

predate the Torah's. Nor does MOTB address the fact that the quote from Leviticus included on the label and the other law codes referenced are nearly identical in parts to Hammurabi's Code and widely accepted to be influenced by the legal codes of the ancient Near East, so much so that comparison between the texts is a standard part of many curricula.⁷ The inclusion of this information would, of course, complicate the idea fundamental to evangelical heritage that the Bible is an infallible text if these laws were not directly and exclusively from God.

For those who read the label, the Stele and its Code created by man serves as a foil to the divinely written laws of the Torah, a means by which to flesh out the "history" of the lands of the Bible without any critical engagement with the Bible's law codes as historical documents. The label advances the concept of the Bible's foundation as a singularity rather than part of a complex history of religious, political, and social systems through a series of half-truths that only some visitors will recognize as misleading. Within the Stele's vitrine, there is a small panel with a few laws translated, making it initially appear not that the object is left unexamined, but that the selected passages are left to stand for themselves and do not

⁷ See "Stele with Law Code of Hammurabi," American Historical Association website, <https://www.historians.org/teaching-and-learning/teaching-resources-for-historians/teaching-and-learning-in-the-digital-age/images-of-power-art-as-an-historiographic-tool/stele-with-law-code-of-hammurabi> and "The Bible, Hammurabi's Code and Law in the Ancient Near East," Society for Biblical Literature, https://www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/LessonPlans/Hammurabi_Code_and_Law_in_Ancient_Near_East.pdf.

contextualize the object. The format of the interpretive label is recognizable as typical museum fare, further contributing to the perceived objectivity and merit of the display.

This label is one of many in MOTB that engage in similar practices of presenting misleading data as historical truth. They appear innocuous, and maybe even accurate; however, upon close examination, their distortions or omissions of objects' histories are apparent. The Stele is one of the most recognizable ancient artifacts in the world, but it is still unable to escape manipulation. This kind of interpretive subterfuge is possible because MOTB is phenomenally keyed into best practices in museum exhibition development as an institution that “habitually co-opts and commandeers the research and pedigrees of individual scholars and the institutions they represent.”⁸ Manzullo-Thomas demonstrates this tension in *Exhibiting Evangelicalism*, and based on my experience at MOTB, his call for public historians to finally take evangelical heritage seriously could not be more urgent. As long as museums like MOTB are working with renowned exhibition developers to create spaces that advance evangelical heritage—drawing larger crowds than those of many institutions—public historical work will be equally shaped by their contributions. Leaving evangelical heritage out of our assessments of public history could be an error with long-lasting ramifications.

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Casey Haughin-Scasny is a PhD candidate in History at UC Santa Barbara. Her work examines women's contributions to nineteenth century American museums with an emphasis on the collecting and display of ancient Mediterranean material culture. She holds an MPhil in Heritage Studies from the University of Cambridge.

8 Candida R. Moss and Joel S. Baden, “Foreword,” in *The Museum of the Bible: A Critical Introduction*, ed. Jill Hicks-Keeton and Cavan W. Concannon (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2019), xiii. For more specific examples of MOTB's exhibition strategies, I highly recommend the chapters within this volume.