



Photo by: BLMJ

'Inspired' and inspiring

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Entering its 20th year, the Bible Lands Museum Jerusalem adds a new dimension to its eclectic collection of antiquities.

The Bible Lands Museum Jerusalem is celebrating its 19th anniversary. While that is a substantial number in museum years, it is a drop in the proverbial ocean in the context of the collection that it houses. Spanning the history of civilization from 5000 BCE to 600 CE, the museum contains thousands of artifacts from this region that chronicle the dawn of history to the early Christian era.

Founded by Elie and Batya Borowski, the museum was built to enshrine Elie's massive collection of antiquities and share it with the public. Impressively catalogued and impeccably displayed, the artifacts range from ancient implements, household vessels, seals and ritual objects to jewelry, mosaics and stone statuettes and sculptures. A walk through the museum is a walk through time itself.

"We are different from other museums in the world in that we present a chronological journey through history," says museum director Amanda Weiss.

"It starts with the beginning of civilization and unfolds before you as you walk through the galleries."

En route, you see how neighboring civilizations existed within the same time frame, she explains. Those civilizations include ancient Egypt, Sumer, Assyria and Babylon – the lands of the Bible.

Although the aim of the museum is to showcase the history of the lands of the Bible, the name of the institution has proven to be somewhat confusing, says Weiss. Some people think that it's a museum about religion, while others envision it as some sort of theme park like Disneyland. But one step inside the beautifully appointed museum dispels all misconceptions.

In addition to the permanent collection of regional artifacts, the Bible Lands Museum has an exhibition dedicated to the Classical era of Greece. The installation, entitled "Glories of Ancient Greece," spans a period of 2,000 years, manifested in the form of jewelry and intricately painted vases and urns.

Ancient Rome is represented as well in the museum's Roman Fresco Room, which features a rare collection of 1st-century wall paintings from Rome and Pompeii.

While religion is not at the core of the museum's concept, the BLMJ is featuring a special exhibition entitled "Three Faces of Monotheism." Here, symbols of Judaism, Christianity and Islam from the 3rd to the 13th century CE tell the story of how each religion developed in this region. They also reveal the disparities, as well as the many surprising similarities, among the three major faiths.

To that end, the museum not only displays its ancient artifacts but makes them relevant to the modern world. After all, says Weiss, "Civilization has not changed that much."

Through a wide variety of innovative cultural and educational programs, the museum extends itself to all ages and faiths in an ongoing effort to inspire new generations to understand and appreciate our history and our heritage.

In that vein, the BLMJ has taken an unprecedented departure from its 19-year dedication to the ancient world by hosting an exhibition of a contemporary Catholic artist. Taking a leap of faith, so to speak, the BLMJ launched an exhibition entitled "Inspired: Manel Alvarez on the Bible." The exhibition, which runs until October 31, is comprised of 17 (out of 30) sculptures that depict the renowned Spanish artist's interpretation



of some of the stories and heroes of the Old Testament.

"It is the largest contemporary sculpture exhibition ever brought to Israel," says Weiss. One piece alone, the Carrera marble *Tower of Babel*, had to be cut in three and be shipped in two containers, she says. The white conical structure, which graces the exterior entrance of the museum, stands 10 and a half meters high and weighs 42 tons.

Other pieces in the Alvarez collection at the museum include *The Tree of Life*; *The Tree of Knowledge*; *Joseph and His Brothers*; *Moses*; and *The Golden Calf*. Each sculpture is accompanied by a quote from the Bible associated with the subject. While some of the sculptures are displayed in the museum itself, others are installed in the garden.

Using a variety of materials such as marble, wood, iron and bronze, the Barcelona-born artist rendered his vision of the iconic biblical legends and leaders. The sculpture of Moses is depicted not as the bearded leader towering atop Mount Sinai but rather as a baby in a basket in a long, narrow wooden boat. *Joseph and His Brothers* is a colorful rendering of the group of siblings standing together, with Joseph as the prominent figure wearing a blue garment.

"Blue was the most difficult color to get in those days," says Alvarez .

"Only the wealthy used it."

In all the sculptures of figures, the heads are represented as points. That is, there are full bodies with a chiseled point for a head. The point of that, explains the 66-year-old artist, is that "The mind is our strongest power.

When we have to find a solution for how or when to do something, we can get to that idea with a point; a point can penetrate and go forward. It's like pulling a plough to clear a path."

In fact, the path that led Alvarez to Israel was not exactly a direct route.

His original plan was to take his exhibition on a tour of the United States and end it in Jerusalem as the crowning glory. However, the financial crisis put a crimp in that plan, and the museums in the US decided to wait it out, he says. Then Doron Polak, the curator of the exhibition, contacted Weiss at the Bible Lands. Reluctant though she was at first to even consider a contemporary exhibition, Weiss flew to Barcelona to see the collection – and here it is.

"I am very happy to be here," says Alvarez.

"It feels like being home. This is the perfect place to show my pieces."