

The Manipulation of History for Ideology
Pro-Palestinian and Pro-Zionist Examples

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I N THE PAST THREE DECADES AND MORE, there has been an intense discussion about “Zionist foundation myths.” There are a number of reasons for this, but the work of the Israeli “New Historians” was important as a catalyst or at least as a focus in academic circles.¹ Several of their books in the late 1980s showed that some of the foundation myths of the Israeli state were either wrong or in need of qualification. Other recent studies have examined the “Masada syndrome” and other historical elements important in the developing Zionist national tradition. To the best of my knowledge, the same debate has not yet taken place in pro-Palestinian circles. It is true that Edward Said’s *Orientalism* did arouse a debate, though it went much beyond the issue of a Palestinian state. But in any case the Palestinian side also has its “foundation myths.”

My aim in this paper is to discuss how both sides in the debate have attempted to manipulate history to support their own ends. The focus will be on examples mainly from ancient history to illustrate the point. The pro-Zionist examples include Masada and Bar-Kokhva; the pro-Palestinian examples will include Keith Whitelam’s *The*

¹ Benny Morris, the one who coined the term “New Historian” for himself and several others, has pointed out that the debate had a number of causes, partly because of a developing openness in Israeli society but especially because of the opening of archives relating to 1948 under the thirty-year embargo rule, not only in Israel but in the US, Britain, and the UN. Several of the writings of the “New Historians” were widely read in academic and even popular circles, especially Morris’s 1988 work on the refugee problem, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947–1949* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). As Morris has argued, the New Historians did not initiate the debate and made only a small portion of the change of attitudes (“long-term historical processes and a traumatic historical reality [in the First Intifada] were infinitely more important”), but the New Historiography represented a concern already becoming widespread. See Benny Morris, ed., *Making Israel* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 6–7.

Invention of Ancient Israel and Shlomo Sand's *The Invention of the Jewish People*.²

Pro-Zionist Examples

I want to consider two examples from antiquity that have been important in modern Israeli nationalistic consciousness and education: Masada and Bar-Kokhva. Interest in both of them goes back at least to the nineteenth century and the beginnings of the modern Zionist movement.

Masada

Nachman Ben-Yehuda has written extensively on the part played by Masada in the modern history of Zionism and Israeli nationalism,³ but the term “Masada complex” (“Masada syndrome,” “Masada myth”) long predates his work.⁴ It has been defined as follows:

the conviction ... that it is preferable to fight to the end rather than to surrender and acquiesce to the loss of independent statehood.⁵

The following two quotations illustrate the place of the Masada in recent thinking:

Nearly one thousand Jewish men, women and children who had survived the fall of Jerusalem refused to surrender to Rome. They took over King Herod's fortress on the steep rock-mountain of Masada by the Dead Sea. For three years they managed to hold their own against repeated Roman attempts to dislodge them. When the Romans finally broke through, they

² Keith W. Whitelam, *The Invention of Ancient Israel: The Silencing of Palestinian History* (London: Routledge, 1996); Shlomo Sand, *The Invention of the Jewish People* (London: Verso Books, 2010).

³ For the history of Masada I draw on primary sources, as discussed in Lester L. Grabbe, *Judaism from Cyrus to Hadrian: Vol. I: Persian and Greek Periods; Vol. II: Roman Period* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992); *A History of the Jews and Judaism in the Second Temple Period 4: The Jews under the Roman Shadow (63 BCE to 70 CE, with an Excursus to 138 CE)* (Library of Second Temple Studies; London and New York: T&T Clark International, forthcoming). But for discussion and examples relating to the modern situation, I have depended primarily on Nachman Ben-Yehuda, *The Masada Myth: Collective Memory and Mythmaking in Israel* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995); Nachman Ben-Yehuda, *Sacrificing Truth: Archaeology and the Myth of Masada* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2002); Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). Also consulted were Nachman Ben-Yehuda, “The Masada Myth,” *Bible and Interpretation* (2000), <http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/2000/masada.shtml>; Robert Alter, “The Masada Complex,” *Commentary* 56, no. 1 (July 1973): 19–24.

⁴ It has been traced back as early as 1963. See Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots*, 209.

⁵ Susan H. Rolef, ed., *Political Dictionary of the State of Israel* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1988), 214.

found that the Jews had committed suicide so as not to surrender to the enemy.⁶

Today, we can point only to the fact that Masada has become a symbol of heroism and of liberty for the Jewish people to whom it says: “Fight to death rather than surrender; Prefer death to bondage and loss of freedom.”⁷

Ben-Yehuda did a thorough survey of the cultural elements of the nation to check for the place and use of Masada in those contexts.⁸ He concluded that examining all these areas gave a powerful cultural analysis with regard to the amount of correspondence between the presentation of Masada in Israeli culture and our primary source, Josephus.

The Masada mythical narrative apparently began to be created about the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁹ It was used in a debate between two famous Zionist ideological leaders, Ahad Ha’am and Micha Yossef Ben-Gurion (Berdichevsky). Several developments gave it a considerable boost in the 1920s: a Hebrew translation of Josephus in 1923; the publication of Yitzhak Lamdan’s most popular “Masada” poem in 1927; and the promotion of Masada as a heroic tale by Shmarya Guttman and the academic Joseph Klausner in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Guttman (1909–96) took a tour of the Dead Sea with friends in 1933 and climbed Masada, for which he had Josephus’s account. He was the main one fostering a pilgrimage to Masada as a regular part of youth movements and Haganah training. He believed that knowing the land and fighting for it were essential elements of the Zionist consciousness.

The archaeological finds in the 1960s gave a new impetus to national interest in Masada. Few, if any, had more influence than Yigael Yadin (1917–84) who had been chief of staff of the Israel Defence Forces, before studying for a career as an archaeologist and Dead Sea Scrolls scholar. It was he who excavated Masada in 1963–65. The English version of his book in 1966 was *Masada: Herod’s Fortress and the Zealots’ Last Stand*, but the earlier Hebrew title translates literally as *Masada: In Those Days, At This Time* (הזה בזמן מצודה: בימים ההם), a phrase taken from the Hanukkah liturgy.

What we find in the Zionist collective memory are some definite changes of emphasis—if not to the actual story—from the account in Josephus. Some of these are the following:¹⁰

⁶ From the 1985 booklet, *Facts about Israel*, published by the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Information Division, 22.

⁷ Moshe Dayan, ed., *Masada* (Paris: Armand and Georges Israël, 1983), 21.

⁸ These included the following (according to Ben-Yehuda, “The Masada Myth”): 1. Youth movements (the major seven youth movements in Israel, both secular and religious); 2. The Jewish underground movements in the Mandate period; 3. The Israeli army; 4. School textbooks in both elementary and high schools, and reference and encyclopedic works; 5. The daily printed media (secular and religious) during the 1963–65 excavations of Masada; 6. Presentations to tourists who visit the site of Masada; the printed manual tour guides; the numbers of visitors; the development of the site for tourists; 7. The presentation in art forms: children’s literature; adult fiction; poetry; theater; movies; pictures; sculpturing; science fiction.

⁹ Ben-Yehuda, “The Masada Myth”; Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots*, 62–65.

¹⁰ Ben-Yehuda (*Sacrificing Truth*) has catalogued most of these. Although I am working from Josephus’s own account, I find that Ben-Yehuda has done his research on Josephus carefully. For information on the

- *Some of the “Zealots” who were defending Jerusalem took refuge in Masada after the fall of the city in 70 CE.*
Josephus tells us that Masada was taken over in 66 CE by members of the *Sicarii*. They were a group who mainly attacked other Jews (supposedly collaborators with the Romans), even the high priest, using a hidden *sica* (type of dagger), beginning already in the 40s or 50s (*War* 2.13.3). Their name can thus be roughly translated as “Assassins.” They obtained money by kidnapping (e.g., members of the high priestly family) and even by murder for hire. Their leader was assassinated by other Jewish groups, and they were driven out of the city and took refuge in Masada already in 66 CE (*War* 2.17.8–9; 4.7.2). They had no part in the defence of Jerusalem, but lived by raiding the local villages and robbing and killing fellow Jews (*War* 4.7.2; 7.8.1), using the excuse that these Jews had submitted to Rome. They are alleged to have massacred 700 fellow countrymen, including women and children, at En-gedi (*War* 4.7.2; 7.8.1).
- *It is common to refer to the defenders of Masada as “Zealots” (as Yadin does).*
As noted in the previous point, the defenders were members of the *Sicarii*. The “Zealots” were one of the groups defending Jerusalem, and most of their members seem to have died there.¹¹
- *A long siege (e.g., “three years”) is implied in most discussions.*
The siege was actually brief (*War* 7.8.2–9.2). The Romans established the siege, first building a wall around the site to prevent escape. They then constructed the ramp to get to the top. Once it had reached the top and they were able to deploy the battering ram, the climax came quite quickly. The siege lasted a few months at most.
- *Eleazar son of Jairus, the leader of the Sicarii, made a striking speech on the nature of freedom on the eve of the final Roman attack (War 7.8.6–7).*
It was common for Greek and Roman historians to invent speeches and put them into the mouths of historical characters. The speech supposedly given by Eleazar was an invention of Josephus, though, interestingly, it is very religious: God as the only king, God’s having abandoned the Jews, the immortality of the soul. It makes great copy for modern readers of the story, but we have no idea whether Eleazar made a speech or, if he did, what its contents were.
- *Most or all the defenders died fighting the Romans.*
Josephus says nothing about attacks on the Romans (*War* 7.8.5). As the Romans were besieging the site and constructing a ramp to get to the top, they fired arrows and other missiles at the defenders. In Josephus’s account, all the defenders did

modern situation, I depend on him and others as outlined in n. 3.

¹¹ On the Zealots, see Lester L. Grabbe, *Judaic Religion in the Second Temple Period: Belief and Practice From the Exile to Yavneh* (London: Routledge, 2000), 287–88.

was to try to defend against the siege measures, such as building a second defence wall when the first was breached. No doubt some defenders would have been killed by the Roman siege engines, but the vast majority died by suicide, before the Romans broke through.

As Ben-Yehuda pointed out, “The Masada mythical narrative played a crucial role in the crystallization of a new individual and collective identity for generations of Israeli Jews between the early 1940s and the late 1960s.”¹²

At this point, however, we have a curious development. During the early days of statehood, many Israelis found the Holocaust embarrassing, a symbol of the Jewish victimhood that the new state aimed to eliminate. It was only from the early 1960s, with the Eichmann trial, that the Holocaust came to be an important part of collective memory. A commemorative day for the Holocaust was established by law in 1959, but this date served both for the Holocaust and Masada: Holocaust and Heroism Remembrance Day. Initially, the focus was on the heroic aspects of the Holocaust, such as the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, but attitudes to both events began to change in the late 1960s. Even more significant were the Yom Kippur war in 1973 and the events that followed.

These helped to create a new commemorative narrative that saw the similarities between the two events: the “tragic narrative” (as opposed to the earlier “activist narrative”). The tragic version “redefines Masada as the very end of Antiquity and the beginning of Exile.... The tragic commemorative narrative thus establishes a continuity between Masada, the Holocaust, and the State of Israel.”¹³ The two narratives exist side by side in modern Israel and tend to be called upon in different situations. As with the Bar Kokhva revolt, there have been scholarly debates about the facts of the siege of Masada and objections to its use as a symbol. Nevertheless, Zerubavel summarizes the current situation:

In spite of these multiple voices of criticism, Masada has not lost its symbolic significance. Clearly, both the site and the myth have been transformed. In a more diversified and more politically polarized Israeli society, there is much less agreement on the interpretation of the past as well as its implications for the present. But Masada is still part of Israeli collective memory and still evokes strong responses. In this respect the criticism of Masada provides further evidence of its continuing, if transformed, symbolic significance for Israeli and Jewish political discourse.¹⁴

¹² Ben-Yehuda, *Masada Myth*, 14.

¹³ Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots*, 194–95.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 213.

Bar-Kokhva

Unlike the 66–70 CE war, for which we have the detailed account in Josephus, we are poorly informed about the second Jewish revolt against Rome in 132–35 CE.¹⁵ We have a couple of brief accounts in Roman sources, a short entry in Eusebius's *Chronicle*, and on the Jewish side a few rabbinic legends. Now, archaeology has added valuable data in the form of letters and documents left by refugees from the Roman advance, including even a few letters from Bar Kokhva himself. Yet even this primary evidence still leaves us with many unanswered questions.

Although the course of the revolt is basically unknown, we have archaeological evidence that Jewish fighters caused enormous damage to the Roman army.¹⁶ Many concealed hideouts have been found from which Jewish raiders could make surprise attacks on the Roman forces.¹⁷ Yet with Roman military resources the outcome was inevitable, and after three years the revolt was put down with huge Jewish losses.¹⁸ Yet these numbers seem grossly exaggerated because the whole Jewish population was nothing like the amount to allow this. We have no indication on what information this number was based. It was probably just a guess, but it does probably reflect many Jewish deaths. Eusebius similarly writes, "Rufus, the governor of Judaea, when military aid had been sent him by the Emperor, moved out against them, treating their madness without mercy. He destroyed in heaps thousands of men, women, and children, and under the law of war, enslaved their land" (*Church History* 4.6.1). Bar Kokhva himself was killed, though because of legendary accretions to the story the exact manner of his death is unknown.¹⁹

The image of Bar Kokhva in the Zionist narrative had a much different emphasis from that in the rabbinic literary accounts. The Jewish sources were primarily negative, showing him as a false messiah whose leadership had led to a disastrous outcome for the Jews. There were elements of heroism in some of the stories, but he was a flawed hero who undermined his own success by his character faults. Zionism of the nineteenth

¹⁵ The available information on the Bar Kokhva revolt is summarized, with a survey of primary and the main secondary studies, in Grabbe, *Judaism; Judaic Religion*. For a survey of views among Zionists from the nineteenth century to the present, I have mainly made use of Zerubavel's *Recovered Roots*.

¹⁶ According to Cassius Dio, "Many Romans, moreover, perished in this war. Therefore Hadrian in writing to the senate did not employ the opening phrase commonly affected by the emperors, 'If you and your children are in health, it is well; I and the legions are in health' " (69.14.3).

¹⁷ See Amos Kloner, "The Subterranean Hideaways of the Judean Foothills and the Bar-Kokhba Revolt," *The Jerusalem Cathedral* 3 (1983), 83–96; "Underground Hiding Complexes from the Bar Kokhba War in the Judean Shephelah," *Biblical Archaeologist* 46 (1983): 210–21.

¹⁸ Cassius Dio states, "Five hundred and eighty thousand men were slain in the various raids and battles, and the number of those that perished by famine, disease and fire was past finding out" (69.14.1).

¹⁹ The rabbinic accounts are too legendary from which to extract useful information. Eusebius states rather cryptically, "The war reached its height in the eighteenth year of the reign of Hadrian in Beththera [Beter], which was a strong citadel not very far from Jerusalem; the siege lasted a long time before rebels were driven to final destruction by famine and thirst and the instigator of their madness paid the penalty he deserved" (*Church History* 4.6.3).

century rediscovered him and emphasized a positive nationalist hero, as opposed to the religious dimension that the rabbis associated with him. The Bar Kokhva fighters became the model of the Zionist pioneers who were fighting for freedom and a Jewish state. Bar Kokhva was a popular subject for children's stories, with a variety of legendary accretions.

As with Masada, archaeology gave a significant impetus to the appropriation of the Bar Kokhva revolt as a national symbol. And once again the chief instigator was Yigael Yadin, who led the exploration of caves in the Judean Desert where literary, artifactual, and skeletal remains from the time of Bar Kokhva were found. Yadin's sense of drama and showmanship was illustrated by the event of May 1960 when he presented a newly discovered document with the name "Simon bar Koseba, president of Israel" to the then president of Israel, Yitzhak Ben-Zvi: "In this act he thus symbolically erases the rupture of eighteen-hundred years of life in Exile."²⁰

One interesting development was the change of date for the celebration of Bar Kokhva's fight against Rome. Traditionally, the fall of Beter was associated with the Fast on the 9th of Av, but this became changed to the Lag ba-Omer, originally a minor festival during the weeks between Passover and Shevuot. This allowed the heroic battle of Bar Kokhva to be emphasized, in contrast to the rabbinic attempt to suppress knowledge of the revolt.

This was not the end of the matter, however. The former general Yehoshafat Harkabi, a professor of international relations and a specialist in Israeli-Arab relations, wrote a short treatise in 1980 arguing that far from being an event to be celebrated, Bar Kokhva's revolt was a disaster that ought to be so commemorated. Harkabi was not a specialist in ancient history and admitted that his concern was with the implications for modern Israeli attitudes. He developed his thesis into a book that eventually appeared in English as *The Bar Kokhba Syndrome* (1983).²¹ His arguments caused an enormous controversy, and his views were attacked even by some academics. By the time of the English edition, however, the Yom Kippur war had intervened, and Harkabi was able to add an epilogue that showed how this conflict had confirmed some of his earlier analysis.²²

A rather different reaction concerned questions of archaeology and the views of the chief rabbi. The chief rabbi wanted the bones identified as those of the Bar Kokhva fighters (though some scholars argued against this identification) to be buried with Jewish religious ceremony. He argued this should be in the caves where they and various manuscripts were found. This caused a conflict with archaeologists, including Yadin who was by this time a political leader and part of the government coalition of the time. If the chief rabbi had got his way, it would have put the caves off limits to further exploration. The bones were eventually buried nearby in a state-sponsored ceremony, but Yadin and other archaeologists boycotted the proceedings. This is particularly ironic in

²⁰ Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots*, 57.

²¹ Yehoshafat Harkabi, *The Bar Kokhba Syndrome: Risk and Realism in International Relations* (New York: Rossel Books, 1983).

²² See the discussion in Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots*, 179–85.

that Yadin had promoted the state burial of the supposed defenders of Masada in 1969. Yet the events since then, especially the Yom Kippur war, had changed public attitudes in certain ways, and many (intellectuals, at least) agreed with the archaeologists.²³

Pro-Palestinian Examples

Keith Whitelam

Keith Whitelam's *The Invention of Ancient Israel* aroused a lot of controversy when it appeared in 1996. An archaeologist friend from America proclaimed it "antisemitic" in a conversation with me, though he was somewhat mollified when I assured him that nothing in my experience indicated that Whitelam was in any way antisemitic, and I had known him for quite a few years. But this was the reaction of some, not least among the more conservative Israeli biblical scholars. Yet the Israeli archaeologist Israel Finkelstein reviewed the book rather more positively in the *Times Higher Educational Supplement*. My knowledge of Palestinian reactions are only indirect, but I understood that it was welcomed by some, though the extent to which it was read by knowledgeable professionals in the field is unclear.

While appreciating Whitelam's desire to right the balance in supporting the Palestinian cause, I argue that this and other attempts to manipulate scholarship to support political causes are misconceived. I have a number of criticisms of Whitelam's study from a purely historical point of view.²⁴

First, he several times cites Edward Said's *Orientalism* in support of his conclusions.²⁵ Said's arguments are not laid out or critiqued; instead his opinion is given in a proof-texting manner, as if the matter were inarguable.²⁶ But although Said's arguments have been widely accepted in whole or in part, there have been considerable criticisms of his use of data. Three of the main book-length critiques have been published since Whitelam wrote, but there were already some sharp critiques from the beginning.²⁷ In

²³ Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots*, 185–91.

²⁴ I should point out that I agree in principle with his statements that the reconstructed history of ancient Israel found in many accounts is unjustifiable. See Lester L. Grabbe, *Ancient Israel: What Do We Know and How Do We Know It?* (London and New York: T&T Clark International, 2007).

²⁵ E.g., Whitelam, *Invention of Ancient Israel*, 1, 45, 67, 224–26, 234–36.

²⁶ See *ibid.*

²⁷ Some of the original critiques were Malcom H. Kerr, "Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 12 (1980): 544–47, www.campus-watch.org/article/id/2998; Bernard Lewis, "The Question of Orientalism," *New York Review of Books*, June 24, 1982; Fred Halliday, "'Orientalism' and its Critics," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 20, no. 2 (1993), 145–63. Bernard Lewis was one of the main early critics and, though some of his comments are a conservative reaction, his arguments nevertheless merit consideration as a leading scholar in the general area. The main book-length critiques are Robert Irwin, *For Lust of Knowing: The Orientalists and their Enemies* (London: Allen Lane, 2006); Daniel Martin Varisco, *Reading Orientalism: Said and the Unsaid* (Publications on the Near East; Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007); Ibn Warraq, *Defending the West: A Critique of Edward Said's Orientalism* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2007). See also Christopher de Bellaigue, "Where Edward Said was Wrong," review of Robert Irwin, *Dangerous Knowledge*, *Times Literary Supplement* (May

such a controversial field, no one can defend his or her position by simply citing a disputed argument. A number of those who have written critically of Said's work actually agree with his overall aims and position but have found some serious weaknesses in some of his arguments.²⁸

Secondly, a constant refrain in Whitelam's book is that scholars referring to the ancient peoples of Palestine do not refer to them as "Palestinians":

Although he [John Bright] discusses the history of the region prior to the emergence of Israel, he never refers to its inhabitants as Palestinians. The land might be called Palestine, yet its inhabitants are Amorites, Canaanites, or Israelites.²⁹

The recognition [by Miller and Hayes] that this region was not the sole reserve of Israelites and Judaeans but was populated by various "inhabitants of ancient Palestine" (1986: 33) does not extend to their identification as "Palestinians." . . . It is possible to refer to the "Palestinian coastline," "Palestinian agriculture," or the "Palestinian economy" (1986: 51), but the inhabitants are never described as Palestinians.³⁰

The fact that they [a number of representative works] refer to the geographical region as Palestine but never refer to its inhabitants as Palestinians is a denial and silencing of Palestinian history. . . . All refuse studiously to use the term Palestinians to describe the inhabitants, even though the adjective "Palestinian" is acceptable to describe inanimate objects such as the physical setting or economy.³¹

These are strange statements and look even stranger as they are repeated time and again. "Palestinian" is a modern term, but scholars writing about antiquity want to be precise and also true to their sources. The sources use various ethnic terms, such as "Philistine" or "Phoenician." Any scholar who was so careless (or dogmatic) as to

17, 2006), www.campus-watch.org/article/id/2974; Irfan Habib, "Critical Notes on Edward Said," *International Socialism* 108 (Oct 17, 2005), <http://isj.org.uk/critical-notes-on-edward-said/>; Stephen Howe, "Dangerous Mind?" *New Humanist* 123, no. 6 (Nov-Dec 2008); Gary Kamiya, "How Edward Said Took Intellectuals for a Ride," *Salon* (Dec 6, 2006), www.salon.com/2006/12/06/orientalism/; Neil Templeton, "Orientalism: A Critique," *The Imperial Archive* (2007), www.qub.ac.uk/schools/SchoolofEnglish/imperial/transnational/Orientalism-critique.html; David Zarnett, "Edward Said and the Iranian Revolution," *Democratiya* 9 (Summer 2007): 43–53, http://dissentmagazine.org/democratiya/article_pdfs/d9Zarnett.pdf; David Zarnett, "Edward Said and Kosovo," *Democratiya* 11 (Winter 2007): 109–43, <http://dissentmagazine.org/democratiya/docs/d11Whole.pdf>; David Zarnett and Rayyan al-Shawaf, "The Legacy of Edward Said: An Exchange between Rayyan Al-Shawaf and David Zarnett," *Democratiya* 13 (Summer 2008): 171–204, http://dissentmagazine.org/democratiya/article_pdfs/d13ShawafZarnett.pdf.

²⁸ Both Irwin and Varisco articulate their agreement with Said's basic position.

²⁹ Whitelam, *Invention of Ancient Israel*, 45.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 46.

refer casually to such different peoples as simply “Palestinians” would be censured by colleagues for imprecision or even ignorance. Of course, there is also the consideration that the modern term “Palestinian/s” is a designation for the modern people and would create confusion if used of ancient peoples. For same reason, we never use the term “Israeli” for ancient Israelites, even though the term in the biblical Hebrew text is the same.

A further point (that Whitelam seems to have overlooked) is that if “Palestinian” is used as a generic designation of all the inhabitants of ancient Palestine, that would include Israelites and Jews. “Israel” and “Judah” were constituent kingdoms of ancient Palestine. Thus, if one chose to use “Palestinian” as a reference to inhabitants of the Palestinian region in antiquity, the Israelites and Judahites would be just as legitimately called “Palestinian” as any of the other peoples. Yet to do so would seem to negate Whitelam’s whole concerns. Interestingly, Shlomo Sand wants to argue that the ancient Jewish inhabitants of Palestine are the ancestors of the modern Palestinians (see below)!

A third point made by Whitelam is that scholars such as Alt, Noth, and Albright were influenced in their views of the history of ancient Israel by the Zionist-Palestinian dichotomy existing in Palestine in the 1920s. For the most part, he gives no evidence for this claim, only attempting at best to infer it from their reconstruction of the history of Israel and often doing nothing but assert it. I find this very unconvincing. I see nothing in the writings of Alt, Noth, or Albright that reflected anything to do with the current Zionist-Palestinian controversy in the post–World War I Mandate. Albrecht Alt and Martin Noth might have been influenced by the situation with Prussia seeking to effect a union of German states.³² But what I mostly see are scholars steeped in the Bible trying to make sense of the biblical text and the other data from the ancient Near East. With Albright it seems that a desire to support the biblical text where possible was the main influence on his views of history.

Albright might later have taken the side of the Israelis over against the Palestinians, as Whitelam points out.³³ But this is long after the 1920s and comes at a time when Nazi antisemitism, the Holocaust, and finally the creation of the state of Israel had been added to the equation. It is interesting to me since my teacher William Brownlee was very anti-Zionist. Although he occasionally made a barbed comment about Israeli treatment of Palestinians, he said little else about it because he (rightly!) thought it

³² This is noted by Jack Sasson, though he comments that Noth based his thesis on a “richly detailed and very carefully presented analysis of the traditions regarding the rise of the monarchy”: “On Choosing Models for Recreating Israelite Pre-Monarchic History,” *JSTOR* 21 (1981), 9. Whitelam himself cited Sasson’s arguments (*Invention of Ancient Israel*, 79) but made no attempt to show that they were wrong and his right.

³³ Whitelam, *Invention of Ancient Israel*, 249, n. 8. He cites Leona G. Running and David N. Freedman, *William Foxwell Albright: A Twentieth-Century Genius* (New York: The Two Continents Publishing Group, 1975), 377–80, but his quote from that source (apparently an oral comment from Yadin) leaves out a telling phrase: “Of course he saw the problems which the creation of the State [of Israel] made for the Arabs; he admired the Arabs, he loved them. But *on balance*, as he always used to say, he thought that if there were two justs here, the justification for Israel to have a state was the greater one; that’s why he supported Israel,” 380 (italics original).

inappropriate to discuss such matters in class. But when asked by some students, he did distribute a reading list and some other pro-Palestinian material (which I still have). Yet Brownlee's views about the history of Israel were similar to Albright's, and I never heard him suggest any criticisms of other biblical scholars for taking a "pro-Zionist" interpretation of ancient Israel. This is because, in my view, most biblical scholars had no such model in mind; it is simply a figment of Whitelam's imagination. To make such claims without evidence is as absurd as the claim of my friend (cited above) that Whitelam was antisemitic, in spite of having no evidence of this claim.

One can debate the issue of trying to establish an ancient history for the Palestinians before Islam, though I question how interested Palestinians are in the matter. Indeed, I think most Palestinians would recoil in horror at being equated with the ancient polytheistic Canaanites! It is true that some Zionists have used the history of ancient Israel—illegitimately in my opinion—to support their cause. More frequent, however, is to use biblical material, such as the promise to Abraham. But I do not see what ancient Israel has to do with modern Zionism, nor what ancient Phoenicia or ancient Philistia have to do with modern Palestine.³⁴ I sympathize with the desire to write a history of ancient Palestine, but why does Whitelam not write it?³⁵ I agree with Whitelam's statement, "It is the historian who must set the agenda and not the theologian"; but I would go further and state, it is the historian who must set the agenda and not the politician!

Shlomo Sand

Sand is one of the few radicals to have an Israeli university post, but this is probably because his specialty is modern French history, and he has written little on Israeli or Zionist history. His recent *Invention of the Jewish People* has sold very well in Israel as well as the English-speaking world but has also attracted a huge amount of criticism. The reason is that the thesis of his book is that the idea of the Jewish nation and even Jewish identity is a modern invention. He claims that a large number of Jews in the Roman empire arose through conversion; likewise, the bulk of European Jews originated as converts of the Khazar kingdom (ironically, precisely an argument used in some antisemitic quarters). He further concludes that the descendents of the ancient Jews of Palestine are the modern Palestinians.

Sand is dealing with areas outside his area of competence, and those of us who specialize in the history of the ancient Jews find seriously weak arguments in his book. (That does not prevent his stating his own opinion firmly even in those areas where he should show more caution and humility.) The question of the Khazars is outside my own area of knowledge, though it has been critiqued as problematic.³⁶ Some specialists have argued that there may have been large numbers of converts in the Roman Empire, but

³⁴ Whitelam, *Invention of Ancient Israel*, 68.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 69.

³⁶ See Anita Shapira, "The Jewish-People Deniers," review of Shlomo Sand, Hebrew edition of *The Invention of the Jewish People*, *Journal of Israeli History* 28 (2009): 63–72.

that is controversial and not the view of most specialists in Second Temple Judaism.³⁷ It is generally agreed that there was no special Jewish mission for converts, as we later find among Christians. There were also many obstacles to conversion. First, circumcision would have been a major obstacle to male converts, which is why there seem to have been more female converts. Secondly, there was great hostility toward the Jews in the eastern Mediterranean after the Hasmonean state and help provided by the Judeans to the Romans in their conquest of Egypt, manifest in the widespread attacks on the Jewish communities in Greek cities of the East after the 66–70 revolt began.³⁸ Thirdly, after 70 CE Jews were tagged as “rebels” against Rome and were required everywhere in the Roman Empire to pay a “Jewish tax” (Josephus, *War* 7.6.6; Cassius Dio 66.7). Finally, circumcision was forbidden to non-Jews by Roman law, a law reaffirmed by Antoninus Pius after the Bar-Kokhva revolt.³⁹

Thus, there were many obstacles to conversion. There is also the problem of estimating the number of Jews at the time, which is difficult. Yet we do know that there were some conversions, such as the Adiabene royal house, and under Hasmonean rule there was mass conversion forced on the Idumeans and the Itureans. Whether the Itureans remained Jews is not known, but it seems that many Idumeans did, even coming to the aid of the rebels in Jerusalem during the 66–70 CE revolt.⁴⁰ Furthermore, I have argued against relying on scholarly consensus (such as that against the widespread conversion under the Romans) as evidence for maintaining a particular view.⁴¹

Yet, even were we to accept Sand’s stance about widespread conversion for the sake of argument, there are major problems with his position about Jewish identity. The question of Jewish identity was hardly an innovation of Sand: it has been debated for a long time, but this has not generally been to discount that the Jews had an identity as a people (or an *ethnos* in the Greco-Roman world). In fact, I have published two discussions on Jewish identity, and I can say that Sand has largely missed the point.⁴² The fact is that the Jews had an ethnic identity for centuries in the ancient Near East and Greco-Roman world after they ceased to be a nation. Without going over the long debate about ethnic identity, a widely accepted definition is the following:

³⁷ Louis H. Feldman has argued for a great deal of conversion: *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World: Attitudes and Interactions from Alexander to Justinian* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); “Conversion to Judaism in Classical Antiquity,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 74 (2003): 115–56. A discussion of the question of Jewish conversion is found in Grabbe, *Judaism*, 534–37; *Judaic Religion*, 292–97.

³⁸ For a discussion and further bibliography on these, see Grabbe, *Judaism*, 449.

³⁹ See Grabbe, *Judaism*, 570–71 and the references there.

⁴⁰ Grabbe, *Judaism*, 329–31, 457–59.

⁴¹ See Lester L. Grabbe, “The Case of the Corrupting Consensus,” in *Between Evidence and Ideology: Essays on the History of Ancient Israel read at the Joint Meeting of the Society for Old Testament Study and the Oud Testamentisch Werkgezelschap Lincoln, July 2009*, ed. Bob Becking and Lester L. Grabbe (OTS 59; Leiden: Brill, 2011), 83–92.

⁴² See Grabbe, *Judaism*, ch. 3; *A History of the Jews and Judaism in the Second Temple Period 2: The Coming of the Greeks: The Early Hellenistic Period (335–175 BCE)* (Library of Second Temple Studies 68; London and New York: T&T Clark International, 2008), ch. 6.

a group of people who share most—but not necessarily all—of the following: (1) a collective proper name; (2) a myth of common ancestry; (3) historical memories; (4) one or more differentiating elements of common culture; (5) an association with a specific homeland (which may be symbolic, without physical control of the homeland); and (6) a sense of solidarity among at least parts of the group.⁴³

This refutes one of Sand's main points, that being a Jew was based on religious identity. Again, Sand is unaware of the debate. To summarize a longer discussion I have given elsewhere, religion is a part of ethnic identity but only one part. Already in the Persian and early Hellenistic periods the term *Ioudaios* had associations with the territory and people of Judah. The Hebrew designation *Yehudi* (יהודי “Judahite”) arose as a reference to those from the area of *Yehuda* (יהודה “Judah”). However, it is not just a “geographical” designation since it always seems to have had an ethnic connotation; that is, even those living outside Judah were still called “Judahites.” Those deported from Judah by Nebuchadnezzar continued to be referred to as “Jews/Judahites” (Jer. 40:11; 44:1; Esther 2:5; 3:6, etc.). The colony at Elephantine continued to call its members *Yehudil Yehudaya* (יהודי/יהודיה) generations after the original settlers had left Judah to live in Egypt.

In the papyri, identifying someone by *Ioudaios* is comparable to identifying someone as Macedonian, Thracian, Athenian, and Persian. Some of these terms are debated and may not be ethnic designations in all contexts, but they are ethnic terms in at least some contexts. The overwhelming impression is that you were a *Ioudaios* in the Greco-Roman world if you were born one. Ethnic identity naturally included religious peculiarities, and both insiders and outsiders regarded certain religious practices as characteristic of being a Jew. Yet Jewish identity was hardly an exclusively religious matter. The question can in part be clarified by considering those Jews who are reported to have abandoned their Judaism in antiquity. The examples suggest that abandoning the Jewish religion did not make them cease to be Jews. While religion was part of ethnic identity, it was not the sole criterion even among Jews.

The Jews are referred to repeatedly in Greco-Roman sources as a “people” (*ethnos*, *laos*). They were identified in the Greco-Roman period as another people or ethnic group alongside many such at the time. They were not seen as only a religion, in the same way as Isis worshippers or similar religious conversion groups were. As Martin Goodman (a historian of Rome and Jews under the Romans) notes, Roman sources

⁴³ Raz Kletter, “Can a Proto-Israelite Please Stand Up? Notes on the Ethnicity of Iron Age Israel and Judah,” in *I Will Speak the Riddles of Ancient Times: Archaeological and Historical Studies in Honor of Amihai Mazar on the Occasion of his Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. Aren M. Maeir and Pierre de Miroschedji (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 574. A similar definition is given in Sergey Sokolovskii and Valery Tishkov, “Ethnicity,” in *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology*, ed. Alan Barnard and Jonathan Spencer (London and New York: Routledge, 1996): 190–93.

refer to the Jews as a *natio*, a “people, race, nation.”⁴⁴

Here we come to the crux of the matter: one of the most curious of Sand’s claims concerns what he calls “ethnobiology,” by which he seems to mean the idea that ethnic identity depends on biology—on DNA. In a number of references he indicates his disapproval of this concept, and rightly so. But this immediately exposes the major flaw in Sand’s argument: he has made Jewish identity a matter of DNA—of ethnobiology! He is essentially saying that the Jews could not be a people because they have diverse origins. Leaving aside the controversy over whether they really have such diverse origins as he claims, this does not prevent their being a people, an *ethnos*. As noted above, ethnic identity usually has some form of presumed kinship between members of the group, but this is frequently manufactured and is usually only a myth. But all those with a Jewish identity claim most of the six characteristics for an ethnic group as found in the definition of Kletter and others. They are an *ethnos* or people, regardless of common DNA. Sand has contradicted his own argument.

Conclusions

I have examined several examples of where history has been manipulated for political purposes in the Israeli-Palestinian controversy. In my opinion, such manipulation is unjustified and contrary to good history work. As well as writing extensively on ancient Jewish and Israelite history, I have set out my principles for writing history at length. A major principle is that if you allow ideological concerns—however noble they might seem at the time—to structure your research and your historical reconstruction, you undermine and call into question the validity of all your historical work.

The two Zionist examples examined aspects of collective memory that have a long history. There are of course many other examples of collective memory used for nationalistic purposes in Zionist thinking, some of which have been critiqued by the Israeli New Historians since the late 1980s. But in spite of all the negatives and faults, at least there has been a public debate, and the attitudes of many ordinary Israelis not in the academic establishment have been altered in some sense as a result. What is very much needed is a similar public self-examination on the part of Palestinians and their supporters.

One may have sympathy with the plight of the Palestinians, but the historical criticisms of the Zionist enterprise are equally valid, *mutatis mutandis*, for the Palestinian endeavour. As Gershom Gorenberg asks,

If a collective, politicized narrative obstructs Israelis’ view of their past, why is building such a narrative positive for Palestinians? If fragmentary testimony helps us understand how Palestinians experience 1948 and how

⁴⁴ Martin Goodman, “Secta and Natio,” review of Shlomo Sand, *The Invention of the Jewish People*, *The Times Literary Supplement* (Feb 26, 2010).

memory changes over time, might not Israeli testimony have the same value?⁴⁵

One cannot reject Zionist myths and then turn around and support Palestinian ones. You cannot reject Zionist use of the Bible or the history of ancient Israel and then create some sort of artificial ancient history for modern Palestinians. Both invent history for ideological causes, and both are equally invalid.

⁴⁵ Gershom Gorenberg, "Memory Serves: Two Books Look at Oral Testimony and Israel in 1948," *Bookforum*, Sept-Nov 2007, <http://www.bookforum.com>.