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Gudrun Krämer: A History of Palestine

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Chapter One

NAMES AND BORDERS

THERE ARE NO INNOCENT TERMS, especially in geography. For centuries Palestine, as known under the British Mandate in the twentieth century, formed no independent geographical and political unit. Its names and borders changed, and so did its population.¹ As a part of the Fertile Crescent extending from the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf, and from the Taurus and Zagros Mountains in the north to the Arabian desert in the south, Palestine was always a land of passage. For this reason it was also a site of cultural encounter and exchange. As part and parcel of “greater” Syria, Palestine has few natural landmarks, and aside from the Mediterranean it has no “natural borders.” The Jordan Valley provides one geographical marker and the Sinai Peninsula another. But neither of them offered any “natural” protection to the inhabitants of the area against hostile incursions. Its borders were largely man-made and hence variable, often determined less by the local population than by powerful neighbors. Still, over time an entity emerged that stretched from the Mediterranean to the Jordan Valley and sometimes beyond, depending on the state of settlement of the Syrian desert. In the north, it included parts of present-day Lebanon as far as the Litani River; in the south, it contained portions of the Negev, but not the Sinai. In political terms, Palestine in part or in whole was usually a province within a great empire; only rarely, and even then only for short periods, did it form an independent political unit.

In the context of the Jewish-Arab conflict over Palestine, places and place-names have acquired great significance to all efforts to legitimize particular historical rights to the land. To be able to establish the *names of things* serves as one of the most telling indicators of political and cultural power.² For this reason the various terms used to designate the

¹ Place-names will be given according to contemporary usage (Lebanon, Syria, etc.).

² Benvenisti (2000), esp. ch. 1; Enderwitz (2002), ch. 4. R. Khalidi (1997), ch. 2, highlights different usages not just between Jews and Arabs, but also between Muslim and Christian Arabs; with a different approach, see also Lewis (1980); Biger (1990), pp. 2–4; Biger (2004), ch. 1. For the role of archaeology in this competition over historical rights and political claims, see also Neil Asher Silverstein, *Between Past and Present. Archeology, Ideology, and Nationalism in the Modern Middle East* (New York 1989), and Nadia Abu El-Haj, *Facts on the Ground: Archeological Practice and Territorial Self-Fashioning in Israeli Society* (Chicago 2002).

land of “Palestine” are instructive, reflecting as they did the dominant perspective and by the same token prevailing power relations. As is well known, the terms “Near” and “Middle East” make sense only when viewed from Europe, but were nonetheless adopted into the political vocabulary of these regions themselves. Regarding Palestine, the dominant perspective has clearly been informed by biblical associations, on the basis of which even the borders of the British Mandate were drawn after World War I. This perspective, however, is distorted and distorting, affecting presentations of the land and its people as well as their history. It places the Jews at the center, pushing all other population groups (even if and when they formed a majority) into the background, if it considers them at all. This holds for ancient (“biblical”) as much as for modern times. Remarkably, it also holds for Arab Christians, about whom we know far less than about the Jewish inhabitants of the area, at least for the modern period. Both Muslim and Christian Palestinians have complained about their marginalization in public perception and historical research. Still, the “biblical” approach is the prevalent one, and the most powerful historically. In the following it will be impossible to escape it entirely. The Jewish claim to Palestine as the “Land of Israel” (*Eretz Yisrael*) bases itself on biblical narratives and asserts the unbroken presence of the Jewish people in this land and their bond to it. The Arab claim, meanwhile, calls into question the uninterrupted presence of Jews, and points to Arab roots dating back over a millennium. Some will refer to the Canaanites, who settled in the land before the Israelites, as their own ancestors.

Both sides, then, claim priority in terms of chronology (the right of the firstborn, so to speak), both make use of archaeology, both draw maps, and both argue by means of place-names. Scarcely any spot on the map—whether it be Jerusalem (Urshalimum/Yerushalayim/al-Quds), the northern plain leading from the Mediterranean to the Jordan Valley (Esdra(e)lon and Jezreel/Marj Ibn Amir), or the hilly inland terrain (Judaea and Samaria in Hebrew)—is exempt from this contest. Palestine, or Eretz Israel, offers a textbook case of the “territorialization of history,” in which political claims are anchored in historical geography. Biblical scholars have spoken of a veritable “geotheology.”³ For this reason we need to clarify not only designations such as “Canaan” or “Palestine” itself, but also “Eretz Israel,” “Promised Land,” and “Holy Land”—designations that were first used following Israelite settlement in a land previously controlled by the Egyptians, Hittites, or Assyrians, and inhabited by various ethnic groups.

³ Thoma (1970), pp. 37–38.

“CANAAN” AND “PALESTINE”

Settlement can be traced back to earliest times. Already in the middle and late periods of the Old Stone Age (70,000–14,000 B.C.), characteristic differences appear between the coastal plain with its river valleys extending inland, and the central hills and mountains, differences that remained important up to the modern era.⁴ In the Bronze Age (ca. 3,200–1,200 B.C.) an urban culture emerged among a population that took its name from the land of “Canaan” and became known under the generic name of “Canaanites.” Little is known about Canaan and the Canaanites. The etymology of “Canaan” is unclear, and the precise location and extent of the territory so designated appear to have varied considerably over time. Contemporary testimony suggests that in the second millennium B.C., the term served primarily to designate individual population groups centered in and around a number of “city-states” rather than a well-defined territory. Only in the Hellenistic period was Canaan identified more or less consistently with Phoenicia, that is, with the Levantine littoral. The sources do not divulge the identity or origin of its inhabitants; we do know, however, that (like the Israelites) they spoke a western Semitic language or dialect, and we have some information about their material culture, religious life, and art, all of which showed Mesopotamian influence. In the Bible they are described with negative stereotypes, as barbaric idol-worshippers contrasting with the monotheistic Israelites, and portrayed with as much revulsion as the Egyptians and their cult of animals and idols.⁵ While this tells us something about the self-image and perceptions of the biblical narrators, we should not take it as a reliable ethnographic description.

The regional powers ruling the area exercised control in varying fashion, and for the most part in a loose manner only. Under Egyptian domi-

⁴ Redford (1992), ch. 10; Lemche (1991), pp. 152ff., and Lemche (1994). The maps found in Rasmussen (2000), pp. 90–103, and Aharoni et al. (2002), maps 17, 38, 46, and 68, rest on conventional assumptions (i.e., biblical accounts). The name “Canaan,” first found in an inscription of Idrimi, king of the northern Syrian state of Alalah, from the fifteenth century B.C., is possibly derived from the Hurrian *kinnahu*, purple or crimson, a product that originated from Canaan and formed its most important trade commodity. This interpretation is also supported by the Greek designation “Phoinike” for the Levantine coast, which is said to be based on the Phoenician word for purple or crimson. However, the name could also be derived from the Semitic root *k-n-*, “low,” signifying “low countries” (this would refer to the coastal plain and the valleys leading into the hinterland). Yet it is also possible that Canaan is simply an ancient place-name, of which we can say with some certainty that it is of Semitic origin, but not what it signifies.

⁵ On the “Mosaic distinction” between monotheistic “purity” and polytheist “impurity,” see Jan Assmann, *Moses, der Ägypter. Entzifferung einer Gedächtnisspur* (Munich, Vienna 1998).

nation, lasting from the middle of the sixteenth century (when it was at most intermittent and by and large confined to the lowlands) to the twelfth century B.C., “Canaan” appears to have denoted an Egyptian “province” (the term is to be used with caution and not to be conceived along the Roman model) whose area roughly coincided with later Palestine.⁶ This at least would seem to follow from the Amarna Letters dating from the mid-fourteenth century B.C., when Pharaoh Akhenaten moved his residence to what is now Tell el-Amarna. Toward the end of the thirteenth century, we find the first mention of “Hebrews,” who may have been identical with, or affiliated to, the bands of nomads, bandits, and brigands called “Apiru” or “Habiru” in Egyptian texts (the issue is much debated). The name “Israel” itself is first found on a stele of Pharaoh Merenptah, which according to the so-called middle chronology is dated c. 1210 B.C., and in which “Israel” designates a group of people, or to be more precise, a foreign people, not a given territory. “Israel” as depicted on this stele may well have been part of the population of seminomadic pastoralists described in contemporary Egyptian sources as “Shasu,” living in the hilly terrain east and west of the Jordan, and sporadically raiding the lowlands, moving as far as Gaza.

The twelfth century was marked by the arrival of the Philistines, members of the so-called Sea Peoples, an Indo-European group from the Aegean region who, both peacefully and by force, entered the region later known as Palestine. The Philistines settled mostly on the coastal plain from the later Gaza to Mount Karmel, while the Israelites lived in the inland hills and mountains. The “Canaanites” and Philistines contributed greatly to the cultural and economic history of the Ancient Near East. The consonantal script developed by the Phoenicians of present-day Lebanon, which was to spread throughout the Middle East and Europe, is a case in point. Yet it was the Israelites (Hebrews, Jews) who profoundly shaped the subsequent history of Palestine, and with one major exception, also coined the place-names used to designate this land. The only designation recalling the Philistines is the one most widely used today, at least outside of Israel: “Palestine” itself. From the Assyrian “palastu” to the Greek “Palaistine,” via the Latin “Palaestina,” the term was ultimately adopted not only by the European languages, but also by Arabic, where it appears as “Filastin.”⁷

⁶ Redford (1992), pp. 170–71, 179, 195, and ch. 10; Weinfeld (1993), pp. 113–20, and ch. 5; Lemche (1991), pp. 13ff., 28ff., 39–40, 48, and 67–69; Miller/Hanson/McBride (1987); Weinstein (1981). On the so-called Israel stele of Pharaoh Merenptah (also Meremptah or Merneptah), see also Bimson (1991). Members of the Sea Peoples had already settled in Egypt around 1650 B.C.; cf. Dothan/Dothan (1992).

⁷ In the Hebrew Bible (*gelilot pelesbet* (related to the old Egyptian *purusati* and the Assyrian *palastu*) originally refers to the southern coastal strip from Gaza to Mount Karmel. The term “Palestine” was used neither in the New Testament nor in the rabbinical

THE “LAND OF ISRAEL”: PROMISED AND TAKEN

It may be bold, if not presumptuous, to attempt a brief sketch of the Jewish tradition concerning such central concepts as the “Promised Land,” or the “land of the patriarchs.” The Bible, on which this tradition is primarily based, does not provide us with a straightforward narrative stretching from Moses, Joshua, and the Judges to the minor prophets, beginning with the creation and ending with the expulsion of the people of Israel from the land of Israel, and their yearning for a return and redemption in this land. Instead, it offers a complex narrative fabric reflecting rival traditions. Their redaction and exegesis were of political relevance, especially with regard to the issue of land. Given the controversies over the nature of the divine promise, over God-given rights and their political consequences, it is worth considering more closely the biblical evidence cited in modern times. Here it is clearly not a question of exploring the intricacies of literary form, historical embeddedness, and shifting interpretation of individual terms, concepts, and textual passages, all of them subject to heated dispute in biblical scholarship. The aim can only be to briefly present the repertory to which later generations have had recourse, often without sufficient consideration for either text or context.

In the first instance we must distinguish between (1) Canaan or the “promised land,” as described in the biblical stories of Abraham and Moses; (2) the area actually settled by the Israelites; and finally (3) the land of Israel as defined by Jewish law, the Halakha. All three (and this contributes considerably to the confusion) can be rendered in Hebrew as “Eretz Israel,” or the land of Israel. The land that according to Jewish tradition Abra(ha)m and his children were promised through a covenant with God, that was later renewed with Moses and is known in the Jewish tradition as “the borders of the patriarchs” and in the Christian tradition as *terra promissionis*, appears in the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament) in various forms, some of them quite vague, if not outright contradictory.⁸ As much as they differ in detail, they include not just the territory of later Palestine, but also Lebanon as well as most of Syria. What the exegetes differ about is whether the Transjordanian lands south of Lake Tiberias (“Gilead,” “Moab,” and “Edom”) should be viewed as part and parcel of the Promised Land or Eretz Israel. This is not the case in those parts of the Bible attributed to the so-called Priestly writer, and the rabbinical commentaries based upon them. They exclude

tradition. In the Talmud, it appears solely as a technical designation for one of the Roman provinces; Lewis (1980), pp. 1 and 6; Biger (1990), p. 9.

⁸ Weinfeld (1993), pp. 52–75, and Weinfeld (1983), p. 27; Biger (1990), pp. 7–8. For the name change from Abram to Abraham after the Covenant, cf. Genesis 17:5.

the Transjordanian region from Eretz Israel, in both its promised (“ideal”) and settled (“real”) borders. The boundaries of Canaan as sketched in Numbers 34:1–12, describing the inheritance promised to the descendants of Moses, seem to reflect the borders of the Egyptian province of the same name, as established by Ramses II around 1270 B.C. after the battle of Kadesh, in his peace treaty with the Hittites. Its eastern border is formed by the Jordan River, whose crossing by the Israelites under Joshua is so vividly described in the Bible; the Euphrates is not even mentioned.

The broader conception of the “ideal borders” of Eretz Israel, in which the land east of the Jordan is included as part of the promise, appears to have arisen later, but was eventually to gain wide acceptance.⁹ We find it in Genesis 15:18–21, where the borders reach far beyond the land of the Canaanites:

On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites.”

Here we already find the famous “from the river of Egypt to the river Euphrates,” or even more succinctly, “from the Nile to the Euphrates,” which plays such a prominent role in modern disputes over the aims of the Zionists and their alleged expansionist intentions. Modern scholars as well as rabbinical sources have identified the “river of Egypt” (*nahal mitzrayim* in Hebrew) not with the Nile or one of its branches in the eastern delta, but rather with the Wadi al-Arish in the Sinai Peninsula, which enters the Mediterranean about forty-five kilometers southwest of Rafah.¹⁰ Still, there remains the daring presumption concerning the Euphrates—even if the “Euphratic hubris” (in Lothar Perlitt’s phrase) was to remain wishful thinking.¹¹ Canaan, where God led Abraham’s father Terah according to Genesis 11:31, formed only one part of the Promised Land as described in Genesis 15:18–21 quoted above. Two things are significant here: First, the land promised to Abraham was neither settled nor occupied by him or his kin, not even in part. Second, even if God’s “eternal covenant” was made only with Isaac and his sons

⁹ Weinfeld (1993), pp. 64–75, ascribes them to the deuteronomistic source, school, or movement, and more specifically to the phase of renewed expansion of the kingdoms of Judah and Israel under kings Hiskia and Josiah in the seventh century B.C. All citations are from The Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version.

¹⁰ Only in 1 Chronicles 13:5 can we identify the Nahal Mitzrayim with the easternmost tributary of the Nile (Shihor in Hebrew; on the latter, see also Josh. 13:10); cf. Biger (1990), p. 6; Weinfeld (1993), pp. 53–54, 57; Lewis (1980), p. 3.

¹¹ Perlitt (1983), pp. 51–53. According to the Bible, only Solomon controlled a territory that reached as far as the Euphrates (but not the Nile). More on this below.

(Gen. 17:19 and 21; Deut. 1:7–8), the descendants of Abraham that Genesis 15:18–21 refers to also included the sons of Ishmael, whom the Bible names as the ancestor of the “Ishmaelites” (commonly identified as an Arab tribal confederacy), and whom the Muslims recognize as one of their prophets.

Searching for precise geographical data, we find just as little help in those biblical passages that describe God’s covenant with Moses and the land promised to his descendants (in the Jewish tradition “the land of those who came out of Egypt”). Here, too, we discover far-reaching descriptions in which individual geographical points are hard to identify, and which in later times were often identified differently. There is also no clear-cut definition of the rights accruing to the people of Israel on the basis of the promise, or the rights of those who do not belong to this people (a point that for obvious reasons attained new significance in modern times). Exodus 23:31–33 addresses this matter quite radically:

And I will set your bounds from the Red Sea¹² to the sea of the Philistines, and from the wilderness to the Euphrates; for I will deliver the inhabitants of the land into your hand, and you shall drive them out before you. You shall make no covenant with them or with their gods. They shall not dwell in your land, lest they make you sin against me; for if you serve their gods, it will surely be a snare to you.

Much the same can be found in Deuteronomy 1:7–8 and 11:24 (“Every place on which the sole of your foot treads shall be yours; your territory shall be from the wilderness and Lebanon and from the River, the river Euphrates, to the western sea”). Joshua 1:1–4 reads as follows:

After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, the LORD said to Joshua the son of Nun, Moses’ minister, “Moses my servant is dead; now therefore arise, go over this Jordan, you and all this people, into the land which I am giving to them, to the people of Israel. Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you, as I promised to Moses. From the wilderness and this Lebanon as far as the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites to the Great Sea toward the going down of the sun shall be your territory.”

It is extremely difficult to discover the historical facts behind the biblical account, and to precisely define the land that was gradually settled or occupied by the Israelites. For obvious reasons, this is mined territory, and it would be pointless to tackle this issue here. Yet we cannot entirely avoid the controversy over the Jewish presence in Eretz Israel or Pales-

¹² The “Red Sea” or “Sea of Reeds” is generally identified with the Gulf of Aqaba; Weinfeld (1993), p. 67; Boehmer (1909), pp. 135–36; Biger (1990), map 8.

tine, because of its significance for Jewish identity and for the Arab-Jewish dispute over their right to “the land.” Interestingly, both Jews and Arabs rely in essence on the biblical narrative, even in cases when they try to refute claims contained in this narrative. Historians and archaeologists of the Ancient Middle East, including leading Egyptologists, have a very different story to tell. Unfortunately, they do not tell the same story.¹³ Again, controversy is due as much to religious and political conviction as to the nature of the evidence and its legitimate interpretation. Extra-biblical evidence, whether material, epigraphic, or literary (from buildings and pottery to coins, seals, steles, and statues, to documents and letters) is uneven in quality and quantity, and highly contested. While excavations have been carried out in many parts of Palestine since the mid-nineteenth century, they have not been possible in all places, and they are of course politically sensitive.

Still, we are not without clues. Archaeological and epigraphic evidence documents the presence of seminomadic pastoralists in the hilly inland terrain well before the twelfth century B.C., when we first learn of a group called “Israel.” Several scholars hold the revisionist thesis that the Israelites did not move to the area as a distinct and foreign ethnic group at all, bringing with them their god Yahwe and forcibly evicting the indigenous population, but that they gradually evolved out of an amalgam of several ethnic groups, and that the Israelite cult developed on “Palestinian” soil amid the indigenous population. This would make the Israelites “Palestinians” not just in geographical and political terms (under the British Mandate, both Jews and Arabs living in the country were defined as Palestinians), but in ethnic and broader cultural terms as well. While this does not conform to the conventional view, or to the self-understanding of most Jews (and Arabs, for that matter), it is not easy to either prove or disprove. For although the Bible speaks at length about how the Israelites “took” the land, it is not a history book to draw reliable maps from. There is nothing in the extra-biblical sources, including the extensive Egyptian materials, to document the sojourn in Egypt or the exodus so vividly described in the Bible (and commonly dated to the thirteenth century). Biblical scholar Moshe Weinfeld sees the biblical account of the exodus, and of Moses and Joshua as founding heroes of the “national narration,” as a later rendering of a lived experience that was subsequently either “forgotten” or consciously repressed—a textbook case of the “invented tradition” so familiar to modern students of ethnicity and nationalism.

To judge from the contemporary archaeological and later literary evi-

¹³ Weinfeld (1993), chs. 5 and 6, esp. pp. 112–20; also I. Finkelstein (1988); Whitelam (1996).

dence, the land actually settled by the Israelites formed only part of the land “promised” to them under the covenant. Its borders were politically determined, and for this reason they varied considerably. A large portion lay on the eastern bank of the Jordan River. As a name for the land settled by the Israelites, “Eretz Israel” is repeatedly mentioned in the Bible. But it took hold slowly, and it is only in the Mishna (“repetition,” “learning”), the oral exegetic tradition that was written down between A.D. 150 and 200 and incorporated in the Talmud, that it was regularly employed.¹⁴ Of earlier use was the designation “from Dan until Beersheba,” which apparently arose at the time of the undivided kingdom of David and Solomon (c. 1000–928 B.C.), whose boundaries are repeatedly specified in the Bible.¹⁵ In 1 Kings 4:21, we read: “Solomon ruled over all the kingdoms from the Euphrates to the land of the Philistines and to the border of Egypt; they brought tribute and served Solomon all the days of his life.” And in 1 Kings 4:24–25, we find: “For he had dominion over all the region west of the Euphrates. . . . and he had peace on all sides round about him. And Judah and Israel dwelt in safety, from Dan even to Beer-sheba, every man under his vine and under his fig tree, all the days of Solomon.” According to these accounts, Solomon’s realm stretched far beyond present-day Palestine all the way to the Euphrates and to the borders of Egypt, although it did not reach as far as the Nile. “From Dan to Beersheba” designated only a part of this area, a kind of core nucleus of Israelite land.¹⁶ Interestingly, it describes the extension from north to south rather than the more usual east to west. Also, it does not refer to the actual borders of the kingdom but rather to two important cultic sites. The formula stamped itself so indelibly upon readers of the Bible that the British had recourse to it when planning the future of their conquests in 1917.

FROM THE “BABYLONIAN CAPTIVITY” TO THE DESTRUCTION OF THE TEMPLE

The undivided kingdom of David and Solomon proved to be fragile, lasting only about seventy years. If we follow the Bible, it split into the

¹⁴ See especially 1 Samuel 13:19 and 1 Chronicles 13:2. Joshua 11:22 speaks of the “land of the children of Israel.” Chapters 13–19 of Joshua offer more detail (see notably 13:2–5); see also Biger (1990), p. 9.

¹⁵ Weinfeld (1993), pp. 52–53; Boehmer (1909), pp. 137–38; Biger (1990), maps 10 and 11. For critical remarks, see, e.g., Lemche (1991), pp. 80–81, and Whitelam (1996), pp. 129ff., 138, 150, 161, and 255.

¹⁶ Further evidence is found in Judges 20:1 and 2 Samuel 24:2. Aharoni et al. (2002), pp. 80–89 (esp. map 105) transform the biblical text into cartographic material (“territori-



Map 1. Palestine, from Dan to Beersheva

alization of history”). The same holds true for Biger (1990), pp. 9–10 and, with a different chronology, Rasmussen (2000), pp. 116–23.

kingdoms of Israel and Judah around 928 B.C., who warred against each other ceaselessly.¹⁷ The northern kingdom of Israel with its capital at Samaria, founded by the sixth king, Omri, was home to ten of the twelve tribes of Israel. Initially, it controlled much of Transjordan and Syria, but only part of the Mediterranean coast. Culturally, it gradually came under Phoenician influence. Between 732 and 721 B.C., Israel was conquered by the Assyrians under Tiglath-pileser III and Sargon II, who followed long-established practice by deporting part of the population to other regions of the empire. Assyrian rule already seems to have had an important impact upon the Israelites, giving rise to new religious ideas and practices. In place of the deported Israelites, other ethnic groups were brought to their country. According to the Bible, these groups mixed with the local population and formed the Samaritan community (who as a group situated between Jews and non-Jews were to capture the special interest of Western scholars and travelers in modern times).

The southern kingdom of Judah, comprising the region between Jerusalem, Hebron, and the Mediterranean coast, avoided conquest by submitting to the Assyrians in 721 B.C. However, the Assyrian Empire soon entered a phase of internal unrest. In 612 B.C. its capital Nineveh fell to the emerging New Babylonian Empire. The subsequent Babylonian conquest of Judah was to prove of far-reaching cultural and religious significance: In what appear to have been two separate campaigns, Nebuchadnezzar II had Jerusalem with its palace and temple destroyed, and its population deported to Babylonia: In 598–97 B.C., a great part of the Israelite elite and craftsmen were taken away, and when those left in the city rebelled under their king, Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the city in 586 and deported most of the remaining population. Nebuchadnezzar then annexed the conquered territory to the province of Syria, the “land beyond the river” (*eber-nahari*, with the river being the Euphrates), within which the former kingdom of Judah formed the subdistrict of “Yehud.” It must be emphasized that not all Israelites were deported to Babylonia, especially in the countryside. But for those that were, the “Babylonian captivity” profoundly affected their self-image, culture, and religious ideas. For one thing, the name “Israelites” gradually gave way to the term “Jews.” Upon their return, the resulting changes spread to those that had remained behind.

After the fall of the Babylonian Empire in 539 B.C., Palestine came under the control of the Persian Achaemenids, who allowed the Israelites

¹⁷ Rasmussen (2000), pp. 124–39; Biger (1990), pp. 11ff.; Aharoni et al. (2002), pp. 90–109. For critical assessment, see Weinfeld (1993), pp. 186ff.; Asali (ed.) (1997), ch. 2.

(Jews) to return from Babylonia and to rebuild the Temple.¹⁸ In the so-called Second Temple period, the Jews still appear to have formed a majority in the former kingdom of Judah (even there, their total number may have been as low as 11,000–17,000 between the sixth and the fourth centuries B.C.), but not in other parts of what they considered Eretz Israel. Already under Persian domination, the area began to be gradually Hellenized, accompanied by Greek colonization, especially along the Mediterranean coast. Both Hellenization and Greek colonization intensified after the conquest of Palestine by Alexander the Great in 332 B.C., even if the majority of the population continued to speak Aramaic rather than Greek. Despite internecine wars and extended struggles between the Ptolemies (who ruled Palestine from Alexandria during the years 286–200 B.C.) and the Seleucids (who controlled it from Syria during the years 200–167 B.C.), Palestine experienced a certain measure of economic prosperity.

The policy of forced Hellenization under the Seleucid Antiochos IV Epiphanes provoked a Jewish revolt in 167–66 B.C. Significantly, it was sparked by a threat to a sacred site, an issue that was to acquire new salience in the modern period: Antiochos had the Jewish temple in Jerusalem converted into a temple of Olympian Zeus where (“impure”) sacrifices were made. Under the leadership of the Maccabees (also known as Hasmoneans), the Jewish rebels regained political autonomy, even if under Seleucid suzerainty, and were able once again to extend Jewish control beyond the Jordan River and into Lebanon. Their realm actually reached “from Dan to Beersheba” and further still to the “river of Egypt” (the Wadi al-Arish), albeit not to the Euphrates or, for that matter, to the Nile. As short-lived as the Hasmonean kingdom was, it informed later notions of the extent of Eretz Israel (in the Jewish tradition, “the borders of those who returned from Babylon”), as well as the boundaries of Eretz Israel as defined by Jewish law, the Halakha.¹⁹ In the twentieth century, the combative spirit of the Maccabees also inspired Jewish nationalists in their struggle against the British mandate.

Pompey’s conquest of Palestine in 63 B.C. proved another turning point, ushering in the era of Roman and Byzantine rule, which was to last for seven hundred years until the Muslim conquest in A.D. 636–38. Yet even as a Roman and Byzantine province, interrupted from A.D. 614–29/30 by a brief spell of Persian control, Palestine enjoyed a large

¹⁸ Critical discussion in Eskenazi/Richards (eds.) (1994), esp. Charles E. Carter, “The Province of Yehud in the Post-Exilic Period: Soundings in Site Distribution and Demography,” *ibid.*, pp. 106–45 (with the population estimates on pp. 108 and 136–39); see also Whitelam (1996), p. 173; maps in Rasmussen (2000), pp. 140–52.

¹⁹ Rasmussen (2000), pp. 153–59; Aharoni et al. (2002), pp. 140–58, esp. map 213; Biger (1990), p. 12 and map 13. For a different account, see Weinfeld (1993), pp. 52, 75.

measure of self-rule. Under Herod the Great (who overthrew the Hasmonean dynasty and ruled from 37 to 4 B.C.) and his successors, the province of Judaea was largely autonomous, whereas the Hellenized cities along the coast were governed by Roman officials. Still, relations between the Jewish minority and the Roman authorities remained tense, and in A.D. 66–70 and A.D. 132–35, two great Jewish revolts erupted with grave consequences for the local Jewish population.²⁰ The so-called Zealot Rebellion of 66–70, poorly prepared, badly coordinated, and weakened by internal strife, ended in failure. The Roman army under general Titus Flavius Vespasianus destroyed Jerusalem, along with Jaffa, Lydda, and other cities. In August A.D. 70 (reportedly on the ninth day of the month of Av, *tish'a be-av*, of the Jewish year), the Temple of Jerusalem, expanded and largely rebuilt by Herod, went up in flames. With it, the center of Jewish worship and pilgrimage and the prime symbol of Eretz Israel was finally destroyed. All that remained was part of its platform and a remnant of its western enclosure, later to assume new significance as the “Wailing Wall.” In A.D. 73, a last group of rebels are said to have committed suicide in the fortress of Masada—a collective act of defiant despair, which, whether it actually happened or not, was later turned into a symbol of Jewish national history. After the foundation of the State of Israel, Masada was transformed into a national site, with the oaths sworn by military recruits invoking the heroic spirit of Jewish freedom fighters in the face of an overwhelming enemy (“Masada will never fall again!”).

After A.D. 70, the troublesome region was elevated to the rank of a Praetorian province, opened up by systematic road construction and occupied by stronger military units. Nonetheless, another Jewish rebellion broke out around A.D. 132 under the leadership of Shimon Bar Kosiba, who was widely greeted as the Prince of Israel (*nasi*) and Messiah, and became known by the name Bar Kokhba (son of the star). The revolt appears to have been sparked by among other things Roman plans to establish a military colony on the ruins of Jerusalem, and (once again) to transform the Temple area into a site of (“heathen”) Roman worship.²¹ The Bar Kokhba revolt as it became known was more carefully prepared than the previous one, although it largely remained limited to

²⁰ On both rebellions, see Aharoni et al. (2002), pp. 187–97; Rasmussen (2000), pp. 160–79. For the “Zealot Rebellion,” see Berlin/Overmann (eds.) (2002), esp. ch. 15 (Neil A. Silberman). For a critique of the Masada myth, see further Sh. Cohen (1982); Shapira (1992), pp. 310–19, and Zerubavel (1995).

²¹ Von Naredi-Rainer (1994), p. 43; Biger (1990), p. 14. The precise location of the Roman temple and statues is disputed; cf. Stemberger (1987), pp. 52–55. For rigorous source criticism, see Peter Schäfer, *Der Bar Kokhba-Aufstand. Studien zum zweiten jüdischen Krieg gegen Rom* (Tübingen 1981).

Judaea proper and even there did not involve all Jews; the Jews of Galilee barely participated, and the Judeo-Christians kept a distance, since for obvious reasons they could not recognize Bar Kokhba as the Messiah. After severe fighting the Romans were able to suppress the uprising—with disastrous consequences for the local Jewish population. Just as they had feared, Jerusalem was rebuilt as a Roman colony, named Aelia Capitolina after the Emperor Publius Aelius Hadrianus. Roman temples were dedicated and statues of Roman gods and emperors erected at the Temple Mount, the tomb of Christ, and the site of the crucifixion at Golgotha. Hence, the Jews were not the only ones to have their sites of worship and commemoration occupied and invested with “heathen” significance. But the Jews suffered more than the Christians: Circumcision was prohibited, and circumcised men were no longer allowed to enter the city, under penalty of death; they were replaced by large numbers of non-Jews, whom the Romans settled in and around Jerusalem. It may be doubted whether this ban was ever fully implemented. Emperor Constantine (ruled A.D. 306–37) is said to have allowed Jews to visit the remnant of the wall of Herod’s Temple, which had survived the catastrophe of A.D. 70, and to mourn its destruction (hence the term “Wailing Wall”).

As another element of retaliation, the Romans renamed the province of Judaea “Syria Palaestina” to erase any linguistic connection with the rebellious Jews. As mentioned earlier, the name “Palestine” in itself was not new, having already served in Assyrian and Egyptian sources to designate the coastal plain of the southern Levant. As a designation for a wider area including the interior along with the coast, it can be traced back to Herodotus (484–25 B.C.). Even after the defeat of the Bar Kokhba revolt, Syria Palaestina remained part of the Roman province of Syria. It was first enlarged through the annexation of neighboring territories and administrative units, and subsequently again subdivided. In the mid-fourth century, the province of Arabia (the former kingdom of Nabataea)—which comprised the Negev, the southern area east of the Jordan River, and parts of the Sinai—was made into Palaestina Salutaris, with its capital in Petra. Around 400, the rest of the province was divided into Palaestina Prima, with its capital in Caesarea in the south, and Palaestina Secunda, with its capital in Scythopolis (Hebrew Bet Shean, Arabic Baisan), in the north, which also included the Golan Heights. Palaestina Salutaris was renamed Palaestina Tertia.²² The majority of the population were of Greek, Egyptian, Phoenician, or Arab origin and spoke Greek, Aramaic, or Arabic, and followed various Greco-Roman cults, which, however, were slowly losing ground to

²² Lewis (1980), pp. 3–6; Biger (1990), pp. 15–17.

Christianity. By A.D. 300, Jews made up a mere quarter of the total population of the province of Syria Palaestina. Only in Galilee did they live in compact settlements. Two Samaritan revolts in 484 and 529, respectively, were crushed by the Romans, ending Samaritan attempts to establish independence in those parts of Galilee known as Samaria, with Mount Garizim as their holy site. By the fifth century, Jerusalem and Palestine as a whole had a Christian majority. At the same time, the Arab share of the population was growing steadily.

PALESTINE UNDER MUSLIM RULE

Following their conquest of Syria and Palestine in A.D. 636–38, the Muslims largely retained the existing administrative order just as they did elsewhere. Within the Syrian province (*al-sham* in Arabic), the southern districts east and west of the Jordan River (formerly Palaestina Prima) were transformed into the military district (*jund*) of Filastin, with its capital first at Lydda and later at newly founded Ramla. To the north, Palaestina Secunda became Jund al-Urdunn (the military district of Jordan), with its capital at Tiberias. Further to the southeast, Palaestina Tertia, the former Nabataean kingdom with its capital at Petra, lost its status as a separate province, though it was only loosely controlled by the Muslim rulers. It was the Crusaders who once again created independent political units in Palestine, Lebanon, and Syria after 1099, including the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem, the principality of Antioch, and the counties of Edessa and Tripoli. Saladin's (Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi) victory at the battle of Hittin in 1187 ended Christian rule over Jerusalem and Galilee; only the coast and some strongholds in the interior remained under Latin control with Acre as the capital. To prevent the Crusaders from recapturing Jerusalem and from there controlling Syria, an Ayyubid prince decided in 1218–19 to raze its walls and fortifications, leaving the city defenseless. Frankish rule was briefly restored not through conquest but through diplomacy, when in 1229 the Ayyubid sultan al-Malik al-Kamil granted Emperor Frederick II control of Jerusalem (excluding the Temple Mount) and certain towns in Galilee for a period of ten years. Local Muslim princes, however, prevented Latin authority from fully exerting itself. In 1244 Jerusalem was briefly occupied by Khwarezmian troops, originating from the region south of Lake Aral in Central Asia (now Uzbekistan), who had been called in by the Ayyubid sultan. Both soon faced a new danger: the Mongol armies under Genghis Khan and his successors, who within a few decades conquered vast portions of Asia from northern China to eastern Iran. In 1258, Baghdad fell to a Mongol army under Hülägü. The Mongols ad-

vanced on Syria and Palestine but were defeated in 1260 at Ain Jalut near Nazareth by the Mamluks, who had in turn overthrown their Ayubid masters and “founded” the Mamluk dynasty. The fall of Acre in 1291 marked the end of Crusader rule in the Holy Land, removing the last challenge to Muslim rule over the area. Until the early sixteenth century, Palestine was controlled by the Mamluks residing in Cairo or their local representatives, who frequently acted quite independently of the sultan. Administratively, the horizontal partition into Jund Filastin and Jund al-Urdunn (terms not any longer officially used) was replaced by the vertical partition into Jerusalem (al-Quds) and the coast, which were further subdivided into various districts defined by their urban centers.

Under Ottoman rule, which began in 1516 and lasted for almost exactly four centuries, present-day Palestine was repeatedly subdivided and fused with neighboring administrative units. Official terminology changed over time, too. Ottoman documents occasionally referred to the “holy land” (*arazi-i muqaddese*). By contrast, the term “Palestine” fell out of administrative use, though it still figured in court documents, where evoking the Palaestina of Greek and Roman times, it apparently referred to the coastal strip, not the larger Jund Filastin of the Umayyad and Abbasid eras. “Al-Urdunn” was now limited to the Jordan River. And yet, the widespread view that the term “Palestine” was only revived at the time of the European Renaissance with its conscious reference to Greek and Roman antiquity, that it was never used by Jews, that it had been entirely forgotten by local Arabs, and that it was brought back to them by Arab Christians in touch with Europe, can no longer be upheld. We do, however, need historical studies that can document precisely when, how, and in what context the name was preserved in “collective memory,” how it was utilized, and by whom.²³ What we do know is that the British seized upon the term and, for the first time in centuries, employed it to denote a distinct political unit. The boundaries of the mandate territory set up after World War I reflected biblical associa-

²³ Cf. Gerber (1998) as opposed to the standard version of Lewis (1980), p. 6, or Biger (1990), pp. 18–19; also R. Khalidi (1997), pp. 28–34. Rood (2004), pp. 44–46, suggests that in eighteenth-century Ottoman court records, *ard filastin* (the land of Palestine) referred to the coastal area comprising the towns of Gaza, Jaffa, Ramla, and Lydda, which did not belong to the districts of Jerusalem, Acre, and Nablus. This usage would seem to correspond to the ancient Greek Palaistina (cf. note 7 above). However, according to Biger (2004), pp. 15–16, the opposite was true in the 1890s, when in official Ottoman usage Filastin appeared to refer to the district of Jerusalem. Note that “Palestine” is to be distinguished from Ottoman concepts of a holy land (*arazi-i muqaddese*); see below, chapter 2, note 32. Porath (1974), pp. 7–9, stresses the importance of Christian notions of the Holy Land, which were also reflected in church institutions, for preserving a sense of a “Palestinian” entity within Syria, or *bilad al-sham*.

tions, since it was to stretch “from Dan to Beersheba.” Already in the nineteenth century, this formula served to define the sphere of activity of the Palestine Exploration Fund.²⁴ It also served as an inspiration to David Lloyd George, British prime minister from 1916 to 1922. The year 1917, in which southern Palestine was conquered by the British army based in Egypt, he noted:

saw a complete change in the attitude of the nations towards this historic land. It was no longer the end of a pipe-line here, the terminus of a railway there, a huddled collection of shrines over which Christian and Moslem sects wrangled under the protection of three great powers in every quarter. It was an historic and a sacred land, throbbing from Dan to Beersheba with immortal traditions.²⁵

²⁴ Stoyanovski (1928), p. 205 (but see also below, chapter 7, note 8); Benvenisti (2000), p. 28.

²⁵ Cited from Frischwasser-Ra'anana (1976), p. 82. See also *ibid.*, pp. 97, 100, 129.