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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).

