Jewish Roots in the Land of Israel/Palestine

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The Jewish people have a very ancient history in Palestine, going back three thousand years.

That statement should be a proposition about history in the same way that, for instance, a statement that the Peloponnesian War took place about 2,500 years ago is a proposition about history. But, in fact, the first statement represents fighting words in a way that the second does not. Some would object to the word "Jewish" rather than "Judean," to the notion that the Jews are a "people" rather than a religion, to the term "Palestine" rather than the "Land of Israel," and to the figure of three thousand years ago rather than an earlier or later time.

The reason for all this controversy, beyond the usual scholarly disagreement, is obvious: the Israel–Palestine conflict. Critics of Israel charge that modern Jews have no legitimate rights to Palestine. They claim that Israelis have dispossessed the rightful inhabitants of the land, the Palestinians, whom they continue to oppress in Gaza, East Jerusalem, and the West Bank (also known as Judea and Samaria). Israel, they argue, is an example of what critics call *settler colonialism*. Just as the Europeans conquered the Americas, the French conquered Algeria, or the British conquered India, so, they say, the Jews conquered Palestine.

The current war between Hamas and Israel has generated loud echoes on US university campuses. Bullhorns are better than bullets, but the sober reasoning of the seminar room would be better yet. Let us try.

Both Arabs and Jews claim to be indigenous to the lands that are now Israel, Gaza, the West Bank, and Jordan. The focus here is on the Jews, but Arabs also were present in

ancient times in relatively small numbers. For example, the mother of the Jewish king Herod (r. 37–4 BCE) was an Arab.[1] Greeks and Syrians were also present in ancient Palestine. After the Arab conquest of Palestine in 636–641 CE, Arab numbers grew: through colonization, settlement, and conversion, the land became increasingly Muslim. At the start of the Zionist immigration in 1881, a large majority of the population adhered to Islam.

The Jewish claim to indigeneity is based on two things: (1) the three-thousand-year-old continuous history cited earlier and (2) the status of the land since ancient times as "the focal point of Jewish existence and its expectations of the future."[2] Jews never give up their yearning for Zion. For most, it is a spiritual longing only, but a significant number of Jews remained in Palestine after Rome's brutal ethnic cleansing, after Christian settlement and conversion, and after conquest and rule by various Muslim and Crusader regimes. Through all these upheavals, there were always trickles of Jewish pilgrims and immigrants to Palestine, which became a flood after the emergence of Zionism in the late nineteenth century.

The following pages elaborate on Jewish indigeneity in Palestine, but they do not attempt to solve the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. One hopes that diplomacy can do so, but unfortunately, history shows that violent disputes over land are usually resolved by war. Indigeneity is a factor in that conflict, but it is not the only factor that matters. What Jewish indigeneity in Palestine does demonstrate, however, is that the Jews have a claim to the land. That account begins in ancient history and continues through the end of the Middle Ages, with immigration picking up in the sixteenth century and continuing through the nineteenth century. From there, the rise of both Arab and Jewish nationalism changed the parameters of the situation.

The ancient Jewish presence in Palestine is based less on the Bible as evidence than on archaeology and on nonbiblical ancient texts from a variety of sources, Gentile and Jewish. The Bible preserves some factual details, but it is not a history book. Believers may, of course, follow the biblical account, but the secular evidence is strong. It would be naïve, of course, to think of archaeology, epigraphy, or textual studies as purely objective and scientific; like history itself, they too are subject to politics. Nonetheless, objectivity is a goal worth striving for.[3]

Palestine is the traditional scholarly term for what is today Israel, Gaza, the Palestinian-administered territories of the West Bank (also known as Judea and Samaria), and parts of Jordan.[4] Its boundaries were often imprecise, and at times Palestine referred to land on both sides of the Jordan River. Historically, Jews referred to this area not as Palestine but rather as the "Land of Israel" (*Eretz Yisrael*). "Canaan" is the term generally used to refer to the land in the Bronze Age (ca. 3500–1200 BCE); some also speak of the South

Levant. But names are not straightforward. “There are no innocent terms,” writes historian Gudrun Krämer, “especially in geography.”[5]

The name “Palestine” is ultimately derived from the Philistines, invaders from the Aegean and Cyprus in the twelfth century BCE who intermarried with Canaanites and formed a series of kingdoms on the coast of what is now Gaza and southern Israel. Egyptians, Assyrians, and the Hebrew Bible each used a variant of “Philistine” to refer to the land of the Philistines. Greek authors such as Herodotus or Aristotle used the name “Palestine” to refer to Canaan more broadly. The ancient Jewish state and, later, the Jewish province were known to the Romans as Judea. In the second century CE, Rome changed the name of Judea, as punishment for a native revolt, to Syria Palaestina and then to Palaestina—whence Palestine. The territory and the various subunits into which it was broken up have had various names over the many centuries from antiquity to the present, including *Filastin* (Arabic for Palestine), *Urdunn* (Arabic for Jordan), and the Holy Land or the Kingdom of Jerusalem, as the Crusaders called it. In more recent centuries the name “Palestine” reemerged among Christians and Muslims, while Jews continued to use the term the “Land of Israel.”[6]

Ancient Israel emerges on the stage of history in the Late Bronze Age (ca. 1400–1200 BCE). Canaan, like other areas in the eastern Mediterranean, was beset by a series of disturbances that shook the civilizations of the eastern Mediterranean toward the end of that period. In the following era known as the Iron Age (ca. 1200–550 BCE), several new kingdoms emerged in the southern Levant, including two Israelite kingdoms in the Palestinian highlands, the area roughly equivalent to today’s Judea and Samaria/West Bank.

The earliest reference to Israel appears in an Egyptian inscription of about 1210 BCE. Most scholars read the hieroglyphic text of the Merneptah Stele, as it is known, as referring to “Israel”: one of several peoples or places in Canaan that the Egyptian king claimed to have defeated. The evidence suggests that “Israel” here refers to a group of people rather than a place.[7]

Note that the first mention of Israel in the historical record puts it into conflict with a great power—in this case, Egypt. That hints at the shape of things to come. Palestine has a strategic location. It is the sole land bridge between Africa and Asia, and it has ports on the Mediterranean and the Red Sea. It is little wonder that empires ancient and modern have fought over it.

Who were the Israelites? How did they emerge in Canaan around 1210 BCE where there is no earlier record of them? There is no scholarly consensus as to who the earliest

Israelites were or how they came to power. Did they migrate from Egypt and conquer the land, as the Bible says? Archaeology offers no evidence of conquest by outsiders. The biblical account may perhaps represent a reliable oral tradition, but the material record suggests that the Israelites already lived in the area and took advantage of the collapse of earlier states to form new kingdoms.

In any case, Israel prospered. Nearly three centuries later, in the ninth century BCE, there are three nonbiblical references to Israel. "Ahab the Israelite" appears on an Assyrian stele, and there are mentions of the "king of Israel" in a stele of Moab (today in Jordan) and in one from Tel-Dan (Upper Galilee, Israel). The latter stele also refers to a king of the "House of David," as most scholars read the text.[8] Nonetheless, scholars debate the historicity of the biblical kings Saul, David, and Solomon and the extent of their realms, if they existed.

The Bible speaks of a single kingdom of Israel that was later split into two: a northern kingdom called Israel and a southern kingdom known as Judah. Most archaeologists believe that nonbiblical evidence indeed points to two separate kingdoms: a northern one with its capital at Tirzah (the later Sebaste), near today's Nablus in Samaria, and a southern one with its capital in Jerusalem.

The northern kingdom, Israel, made the mistake of rebelling against the Neo-Assyrian Empire. That empire conquered Israel, as Mesopotamian documents state; the traditional date is 722 BCE.[9] The Neo-Assyrians deported the elite of the northern kingdom to the east, after which they disappear from history: they are the "Ten Lost Tribes of Israel." The southern kingdom prospered until it too fell afoul of the power politics of the region.

Judah almost certainly had a temple to its God in Jerusalem because no ancient capital city would have been without one. But there is no archaeological evidence of what is referred to as the First Temple, let alone that King Solomon built it, as the Bible says. By the same token, no archaeologist has yet been able to carry out a systematic excavation on the Temple Mount, so much is not yet known. Sometimes archaeology runs closely along the lines of the Bible. For example, two clay bullae (seal impressions) discovered in Jerusalem bear the names of high-ranking royal officials who, according to the biblical book of Jeremiah (38:1–13) were ministers of the last king of Judah, Zedekiah (r. 597–587 BCE).

In 601 BCE, Judah revolted against the Neo-Babylonians, who were then engaged in a war against Egypt. Four years later, the Neo-Babylonians settled scores. In 597 BCE,

they laid siege to Jerusalem, which prudently chose to surrender. The Neo-Babylonians deposed the reigning king and replaced him with Zedekiah. But Zedekiah rebelled in turn, and the Neo-Babylonians imposed a harsh punishment. They conquered his kingdom and destroyed Jerusalem at a date traditionally ascribed as 587 BCE.

The Neo-Babylonian siege of Jerusalem of 597 BCE is recorded in Mesopotamian documents.[10] The destruction of 587 BCE, however, is recounted only in the Bible, but archaeology confirms the event. The city wall was torn down, buildings were burned, and small settlements outside Jerusalem were destroyed.

The conquerors then deported the elite of Judah to Babylonia; that is, southern Mesopotamia. There, they were allowed to prosper and to contribute to the empire. They also contributed mightily to their own culture. Most scholars believe that the Bible only began to take something like its modern shape during the Babylonian exile and the following centuries. Yet the beginnings of what would become the Torah already existed in the kingdom of Judah. Two inscribed silver amulets dating to around 600 BCE were found in a tomb near Jerusalem: their texts are variants of the Priestly Blessing found in the Bible (Numbers 6:24–26).[11]

After it was conquered, Judah became the Neo-Babylonian province of Yehud. The administrative center was probably Mizpah, a site located not far north of Jerusalem, which lay in ruins; Mizpah's exact location is debated. In 539 BCE, the Persian leader Cyrus the Great conquered Babylon and took over its empire. Yehud then became a Persian province. Some of the descendants of the exiles returned to their ancestral land; others remained in southern Mesopotamia, which was destined to become a center of Jewish life. If Psalm 137 indeed dates from the Babylonian Captivity, as the exile is known, it represents the spirit that caused some Judahites to return:

> [1] By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion.
>
> [2] We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof.
>
> [3] For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song; and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion.
>
> [4] How shall we sing the LORD's song in a strange land?
>
> [5] If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning.
>
> [6] If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy.[12]

The province to which the exiles returned was small and largely insignificant. Mizpah remained the capital at first. Jerusalem was not rebuilt until the mid-fifth century BCE, according to the archaeological evidence. It was then that the Second Temple was built.

A little more than a century later, in 322 BCE, Yehud fell to another of history's great conquerors. When he passed through Palestine, Alexander the Great was on his way to conquering the entire Persian Empire, all the way to India. After Alexander's death in 323 BCE, his empire broke up into a series of successor states run mainly by Greeks and Macedonians. Judea—as Yehud was known for about the next 500 years—passed back and forth in a series of wars between the kingdom of the Ptolemies, who ruled from Egypt, and the Seleucids, who ruled from Syria.[13]

During this period the Jewish diaspora—Greek for "dispersion"—expanded. Jews had already been living in Babylonia for several centuries, but the diaspora moved westward, mostly into the Greek-speaking lands of the eastern Mediterranean but later also into the Latin-speaking West. Egypt, Syria, Cyrenaica (eastern Libya), Cyprus, and Anatolia, among other places, all acquired sizable Jewish populations. Jewish communities also existed in northern Mesopotamia and in Persia. Some of the emigrants had been dragged abroad as slaves or prisoners of war, but others voluntarily left in search of opportunity and a more peaceful setting than war-torn Judea.

Greek speakers and Greek culture had a powerful impact on Judea and its neighbors. There were Hellenized cities both on the coast and inland. A large part of the Judean elite adopted Greek culture while the rural population retained its traditional ways. The country might have slowly become Hellenized had not the Seleucids overstepped. King Antiochus IV Epiphanes (r. 175–164 BCE) aimed to become a conqueror but needed money to do so. He looted the Temple in Jerusalem, raised taxes, attacked Jerusalem and built a fortified citadel there, and outlawed such fundamental Jewish practices as circumcision and Sabbath observance. Finally, he set up an altar to the Greek god Zeus in the Temple.

That was too much for believing Jews. A rebellion in 168 BCE led by the members of a priestly family, the Maccabees, drove out the Syrians. After a long, violent struggle, Judea gained independence. The Jews fought hard, but they were helped by the weakness of the Syrian state, which was undergoing a slow death. Judea also had the support of Rome, the rising imperial master of the Mediterranean and an enemy of the Seleucids.

The Maccabee brothers and their descendants ruled Judea first as princes; eventually they took the titles of king and high priest. Their dynasty became known as the Hasmoneans. Jewish traditionalists objected both to the combination of offices, which were supposed to be separate, and to the Hasmoneans' assumption of the royal title, which was meant for descendants of the House of David (whether David himself existed, he was thought to have founded the dynasty). The Hasmoneans emphasized Torah and Temple, but they also embraced aspects of Greek culture. Archaeological excavations, coins, and inscriptions provide material evidence of the Hasmonean era, which sometimes supports and sometimes contradicts the evidence from literary sources such as Maccabees I–II.

The Dead Sea Scrolls, another very valuable source of information, offer a remarkable window into Jewish life—religious, cultural, socioeconomic, military, and political—during the last centuries BCE and the first century CE. The "scrolls" consist of fifteen thousand texts and fragments, mostly in Hebrew, with some in Aramaic and Greek. They demonstrate the variety of Jewish religious experiences in a turbulent era while also providing insight into the world in which Christianity was born. The consensus view is that most of the texts belonged to the sect known as the Essenes, who moved away from Jerusalem around 100 BCE and established themselves in monastic communities such as the one at Qumran (modern name) in the Judean Desert near the Dead Sea. The community survived until its destruction by the Romans in the wake of the Great Jewish Revolt in 66 CE. The ruins at Qumran are visible today.

Judea under the Hasmoneans became a regional power and expanded into what is now central and northern Israel, Gaza, the West Bank, western Jordan, and parts of southern Lebanon and Syria. It was rich and vibrant, but in due course the kingdom was convulsed by the competition of two royal brothers, each wanting to be king. To decide the contest, they appealed to the leaders of the Mediterranean superpower, Rome, which had recently conquered Syria. The Romans were only too happy to respond.

In 63 BCE the Roman commander Pompey the Great invaded Judea, conquered Jerusalem, and put one of the brothers on the throne. For good measure, Pompey reduced the territory of Judea and added its various Greek city-states to the province of Syria. Pompey's new order did not last, however, and the region was unstable over the next generation. In 40 BCE the Parthians, the ruling dynasty of a revived Persian Empire, conquered Judea (as well as Syria) and put a new man on the throne in Jerusalem. Three years later Rome successfully restored control of Judea and installed Herod (r. 37–4 BCE), its candidate, as king.

Tyrannical, violent, and reviled by both Christians and Jews, Herod nonetheless may be deserving of the surname with which he was dubbed, "the Great." Friend to both Mark Antony and Octavian, who became the emperor Augustus, Herod was one of the Roman Empire's most successful client kings. He brought Judea a period of prosperity and enlarged its territorial extent. He was a great builder: among his construction projects were a vast new port city, Caesarea Maritima; the palaces and fortress at Masada and Herodium; and the city of Sebaste ("Augusta") in Samaria. The most famous of all Herod's projects was the Second Temple in Jerusalem, one of the great religious shrines of the ancient world. The Temple's retaining wall still stands as the Western Wall. Graced by Herod's Temple, Jerusalem became a center of pilgrimage for Jews from the East and West, from various parts of the Roman and Parthian Empires. Non-Jewish visitors also came, although their access to the shrine was limited.

Herod's son and successor, Archelaus, did not have his father's abilities and strengths. At first Rome divided the father's kingdom among Archelaus and his two brothers, but eventually Emperor Augustus dismissed Archelaus. In 6 CE Judea became a Roman province and remained one for most of the next sixty years, except for the brief reign of Herod's grandson, Herod Agrippa I (41–44 CE). It was during this period that Jesus of Nazareth (ca. 4 BCE–30 CE) conducted his ministry. Jesus was a Jew who preached the imminence of the Kingdom of God, which would sweep away worldly empires like Rome. Jesus did not, however, advocate armed resistance.

As elsewhere in Rome's vast empire, in Judea the elite was divided between winners and losers when it came to relations with Rome. Some collaborated with the empire, while others sought to be free of its rule. Rome had only a relatively small army of about three hundred thousand men to govern an empire of nearly fifty million people. As a result, revolts were common in the provinces. Judea had already witnessed several uprisings when in 66 CE a particularly serious rebellion broke out. Feeble and incompetent management on the part of the Roman governor allowed a vigorous rebel force to destroy most of a legion. No emperor, even the decadent Nero who ruled Rome at the time, could allow such a challenge to go unanswered.

A forceful Roman campaign of repression followed. Sketchy records of the Great Jewish Revolt survive in the works of Gentile authors such as Tacitus, and there is a detailed record in the writings of Josephus, a Jew. Josephus switched sides during the revolt from anti- to pro-Roman. However traitorous this may seem, it was not unusual behavior by Roman provincials in turbulent times. It also afforded Josephus a view of both sides of the conflict. In addition to literary evidence, coins and substantial archaeological remains round out the picture. Sites such as Yodefat (Galilee), Gamla (Golan), Jerusalem,

and Masada (Judean Desert) offer vivid evidence of the impact of the war. A dogged but fatally divided Jewish defense of Jerusalem led to the destruction of the city and the Temple in 70 CE, an event still mourned by Jews today. In the Old City of Jerusalem, the stones that the Romans threw down from the Temple Mount are still visible, piled up at the foot of the retaining wall. Masada offers particularly dramatic remains of the revolt. A massive and fortified rock that rises from the desert, Masada was the last site of rebel resistance, probably in 74 (or possibly 73) CE. The excavators found various artifacts left by the rebels as well as fortifications and remains of the community built on top of the rock by the rebels. Archaeologists have also found the foundations of the Roman legionary camps and the artificial ramp built by the Romans to attack the fortress.

During the war Rome killed large numbers of Jewish soldiers and civilians, helped itself to Jewish property in Judea, and enslaved and deported tens of thousands of Jews. Afterward Rome imposed a humiliating tax on Jews in Judea and throughout the empire where diaspora communities had grown, especially in the eastern Mediterranean. The empire also turned a deaf ear to Jewish pleas to rebuild the Temple, which it considered to be not only a religious site but also a focus of resistance.

Rome's war in Judea left a mark on the imperial capital. In the city of Rome there were erected two triumphal arches in memory of Titus, conqueror of Jerusalem. Only one of them still stands: the Arch of Titus on the Via Sacra on the edge of the Roman Forum. It displays a vivid relief of looted items from the Jerusalem Temple, notably a seven-branched candelabra (menorah), being carried in the triumphal parade. Not far away, the emperor Vespasian erected the Temple of Peace, a complex that contained looted objects from Jerusalem. The pièce de résistance, however, is also the most famous monument of Roman antiquity, the Colosseum: the amphitheater was likely financed in part by spoils from Judea.[14] Originally the entrance was topped by a victory monument of Emperor Vespasian in his chariot. Roman coins also prominently featured the victory over Judea. Various designs were struck, but a typical coin displays a male and female captive next to a palm tree, a symbol of Judea, with the legend JUDAEA CAPTA, "Judea has been conquered." One Roman coin was struck in the year 80/81, the tenth anniversary of the destruction of the Temple, as well as the year in which the Colosseum was dedicated. The obverse of the coin shows the Colosseum; on the reverse is depicted Emperor Titus, surrounded by war booty. Visible inside the arches of the Colosseum is a four-horse chariot, symbolic of a triumph. Directly above it is a palm tree, a symbol of Judea. On each side of the tree stands a figure, one of whom may be the emperor or a winged victory and the other possibly a Jewish man or woman.[15]

Despite its harsh policy of repression in Judea, Rome never attempted to abolish Judaism or wipe out all Jews. The empire was prepared to tolerate Judaism as a quietist sect, centered in synagogues. The rabbinic movement, which began in the wake of the catastrophe, was largely willing to comply with that model. The rabbis forged a new vision of Judaism as a synagogue-centered religion of prayer rather than a Temple-centered one of pilgrimage and sacrifice. Yet the desire to rebuild the Temple remained, and the spirit of resistance continued to burn. Two more large Jewish revolts were to come.

The Diaspora Revolt, or Kitos War, broke out in 116 and lasted until 117 CE. As the first name suggests, the revolt was centered outside Judea, although it probably spread there as well: the evidence is unclear. The documentation for the revolt is poor and patchy; putting it together requires historical detective work. It is clear, however, that Jewish communities rebelled in Egypt, Libya, and Cyprus at a time when Emperor Trajan was attempting to conquer Mesopotamia (Iraq) from the Parthians. To put down the uprisings Trajan had to divert troops and his best generals from the Parthian front. Meanwhile, Jews in Mesopotamia joined an anti-Roman uprising that succeeded in forcing out the invaders. It is much debated whether and to what extent the various uprisings were a coordinated effort.

Trajan wanted to invade Mesopotamia again, but before he could do so, he died of natural causes in the East. His successor, Hadrian, admitted defeat, in effect, by withdrawing west of the Euphrates River. He gave up the notion of expanding the empire and focused on imperial border security instead. In Judea he decided to rebuild the ruined Jerusalem, but as a pagan Roman city rather than a Jewish one. The gesture was meant to project Roman prestige and power, but instead it was probably the spark of a new revolt. Unintentionally, Hadrian set the southern Levant on fire.

A Judean rebellion broke out again in 132 under the leadership of a man whose nom de guerre was Bar Kokhba ("Son of a Star"). A charismatic and talented commander, Bar Kokhba forced Hadrian to commit between nine and thirteen legions or parts thereof, one-third or more of Rome's legionary manpower, to suppress the revolt.[16] With no surviving work like that of Josephus on the Great Jewish Revolt, the Bar Kokhba war is not well documented. Still, some details survive in Jewish and Gentile literary sources. The evidence of archaeology, coins, papyri, and other artifacts adds to our knowledge. In the end the Romans shed rivers of blood and won the war.

Jerusalem was rebuilt as the Roman city of Aelia Capitolina. The new name reflected both the imperial dynasty—the emperor was named Publius Aelius Hadrianus—and

the chief god of Rome, Capitoline Jupiter. Aelia contained pagan temples but no synagogues. Indeed, Jews were forbidden to enter the city, much less worship or live there, except for one day of the year: the ninth of the month of Av. Only on this day that marked the destruction of the Temple were Jews allowed to enter Jerusalem and mourn at the Western Wall.

It was around 135 that Hadrian changed the name of Judea to Syria Palaestina. This is the only known case of Rome changing the name of a province to punish a rebellion. After the Great Jewish Revolt, the Diaspora Revolt, and the Bar Kokhba Revolt, it is understandable that the Romans were frustrated and wanted to mark a new beginning.

The Romans drove most Jews out of central Palestine and into Galilee, which for centuries afterward became the center of Jewish life in the land. Numerous synagogues attest to a vital Jewish presence in Galilee during the remaining Roman and the following Byzantine centuries. (It is conventional to refer to the centuries between the foundation of Constantinople and the Arab conquest—330 to 640—as the Byzantine or East Roman period.) The "Jerusalem Talmud," as it is called, was compiled in the Galilean city of Tiberias. Meanwhile, after the conversion of the emperor Constantine (r. 306–337 CE), much of Palestine was Christianized, both through conversion and settlement by outsiders. Scholars debate, however, whether the majority of Palestine was Christian or whether a combination of Jews and Samaritans comprised the majority. Samaritans lived in Samaria. Their culture and religion were like that of the Jews but with significant differences. Samaritans claimed to be descended from the ancient Israelites, but the rabbis considered them to be foreigners transplanted to Palestine by the Assyrians.

Jewish communities continued to thrive in Galilee during the Byzantine centuries despite sporadic governmental persecution. Another Jewish revolt against Rome broke out in 351; poorly documented, it was apparently short-lived and was on a relatively small scale. In 360 the Roman emperor Julian, an apostate from Christianity, began rebuilding the Temple, thereby reviving the Jewish hope of centuries. Yet Julian's early death put an end to the project. In 614 the Sasanians (the Iranian ruling dynasty at the time) invaded and conquered Palestine, with substantial Jewish support. For a period of several years, Jews were reinstalled as the rulers of Jerusalem, but then the Byzantines reconquered Palestine and punished those Jews. Yet the Byzantine era in Palestine was ending.

Between 636 and 641 the Arabs conquered Palestine. In general, the new rulers were relatively tolerant of both Christians and Jews. Non-Muslims had to pay higher taxes and

show deference, but they were allowed to worship freely. After centuries of exclusion from the city, Jews were finally able to settle in Jerusalem again. This was considered a major boon, because Jews had never lost their attachment to their holiest city.

Again and again over the centuries, Jews expressed their longing for their homeland in word and deed. No sooner had the Temple been destroyed than Jews began to hope for its rebuilding and an end of exile. From Late Antiquity until the present, for example, Jews have prayed three times a day for the restoration of Jerusalem. All synagogues were (and are) oriented toward Jerusalem. The Passover seder, the annual meal marking the Exodus from Egypt, closes with the phrase, “Next year in Jerusalem.” There are other examples of the yearning for Zion in Jewish liturgy and prayer. It is no surprise that, over the centuries, a small number of Jews continued to return to the Holy Land as pilgrims or immigrants.

For thirteen centuries, from 641 to 1917, Palestine was governed mainly by a series of Islamic regimes: Arab, Mamluk, and Ottoman Turkish. Eventually, most of the population became Muslim. The exception to Muslim rule was the Crusader period, 1099–1291, when varying parts of Palestine were under European Christian rule. From time to time, Palestinian Jews faced prejudice, plunder, or death at the hands of invading armies or hostile rulers. Muslims did not consider the Jews to be equals, and so Jews had to pay a special tax and suffered from other restrictions. In general, however, the various Muslim regimes treated Jews well by the often harsh standards of premodern history. Jews did particularly well when Palestine was governed by the Fatimids in the tenth and eleventh centuries; there was even a Jewish governor of Jerusalem in 1060. A rich source of information about Jewish life in Palestine and elsewhere in the eastern Mediterranean is the Cairo Geniza, a large collection of documents kept in the storeroom of an Egyptian synagogue. The documents span the period from Late Antiquity to the nineteenth century.

The Palestinian rabbinical academy (yeshiva), itself a descendant of the ancient Sanhedrin or Jewish assembly, continued to exist through the eleventh century, usually in Tiberias. Jews in Palestine, Syria, and Egypt consulted the Palestinian academy on a variety of Jewish religious and legal issues. However, the rabbinical academies of Babylon (Iraq), where Jewish life flourished, generally were more authoritative. From the Muslim conquest until the Crusaders arrived, Jewish pilgrimage to Palestine continued. There were also a small number of Jewish immigrants to the country.

The Crusaders, by contrast, devastated the Jewish population of Palestine, at least at first. In Jerusalem in 1099, they massacred Jews, Muslims, and probably some

Eastern Christians. A leader of the Jewish community of Aleppo, Syria, wrote at the time that "everyone who believes in the uniqueness of God, was banished from every corner of the holy soil."[17] But the Jews rebuilt in the Holy Land. Acre (Akko, Israel) became an important center of Jewish life under the Crusaders. Here and there in Palestine, Jewish immigrants from the diaspora settled. Others at least tried to reach the land.

The Spanish Jewish poet and philosopher Judah Ha-Levi, for instance, expressed his longing for Jerusalem in his writing. In one poem, he expresses the wish to kiss its stones and says that he would find the earth of Jerusalem to be sweeter than honey.[18] Ha-Levi left Spain for the Holy Land in 1140. He got as far as Egypt, where he died in 1141 without reaching Palestine.

When Saladin reconquered Jerusalem for Islam in 1187, he allowed Jews to return to the city. They did but in relatively small numbers at first. In 1491, a Christian pilgrim from Bohemia noted of the city,

> There are not many Christians but there are many Jews, and these the Muslims persecute in various ways. Christians and Jews go about in Jerusalem in clothes considered fit only for wandering beggars.
>
> The Muslims know that the Jews think and even say that this is the Holy Land, which has been promised to them and that those Jews who dwell there are regarded as holy by Jews elsewhere, because in spite of all the troubles and sorrows inflicted on them by the Muslims, they refuse to leave the Land.[19]

Jews immigrated to Palestine in larger numbers after their expulsion from Spain (1492) and the Ottoman conquest of Palestine (1516). The cities of Safed, Tiberias, Jerusalem, and Hebron were regarded as the holy cities of Judaism and attracted the largest Jewish populations, but there were other centers of Jewish settlement.

Jewish numbers in Palestine grew in the nineteenth century, and by 1880, Jews were a majority in Jerusalem.[20] They formed only a small minority elsewhere in Palestine, where Arabs were the vast majority. Then came the twentieth century with its multiple revolutions and upheavals.

To sum up, the Jews have an ancient history in Palestine going back three thousand years. Their yearning for Zion goes back well more than two thousand years. Jews are indigenous to Palestine.

To be sure, indigeneity is only one factor in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Yet, it is an important factor. Jewish presence in Israel is not analogous to settler colonialism in the Americas or elsewhere. European colonists—like Cortés conquering Mexico, or the French colonizing Algeria, or the British taking India—had no prior claim to the territory that they took. Jewish immigrants to Ottoman or British Palestine or to the state of Israel were different. In Israel, Jews returned to the land of their ancestors.

NOTES

1. In that period, it was not required to have a Jewish mother to be considered Jewish. By the same token, however, some Jews rejected Herod because his grandfather was a convert and an Idumean, a people descended from the Edomites, traditional rivals of the Jews.

2. Joshua Prawer, *The History of the Jews in the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), viii.

3. I have benefited from the minimalist account of the biblical evidence, with an emphasis on archaeology, found in K. L. Noll, *Canaan and Israel in Antiquity: A Textbook on History and Religion*, 2nd ed. (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

4. On the history of the term "Palestine," see Bernard Lewis, "Palestine: On the History and Geography of a Name," *International Historical Review* 2, no. 1 (January 1980): 1–12.

5. Gudrun Krämer, *A History of Palestine: From the Ottoman Conquest to the Founding of the State of Israel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 1.

6. Lewis, "Palestine," 1–7.

7. On the Merneptah Stele, see Lester L. Grabbe, *Ancient Israel: What Do We Know and How Do We Know It?* (London: T & T Clark, 2007), 77–80.

8. On these texts, see Grabbe, *Ancient Israel*, 129–31; Lauren Monroe, "On the Origins and Development of Greater Israel," in *Israel before the Omrides*, ed. Lauren A. S. Monroe and Daniel Fleming (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2021), 10.2: 94–95.

9. Grabbe, *Ancient Israel*, 135–36.

10. Grabbe, *Ancient Israel*, 188–89.

11. See The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, "'Priestly Benediction' on Amulets," accessed January 22, 2024, https://www.imj.org.il/en/collections/198069-0; Noll, *Canaan and Israel in Antiquity*, 394–96.

12. Psalm 137:1–6, King James Version.

13. Some argue that the inhabitants of Judea should be called Judeans, rather than Jews. For two opposing viewpoints on the matter by two eminent scholars, see Adele Reinhartz, "The Vanishing Jews of Antiquity," *Marginalia*, June 24, 2014, https://themarginaliareview.com/vanishing-jews-antiquity-adele-reinhartz, and Steve Mason, "Ancient Jews or Judeans: Different Questions, Different Answers," *Marginalia*, June 24, 2014, https://themarginaliareview.com/ancient-jews-judeans-different-questions-different-answers-steve-mason.

14. See Louis Feldman, "Financing the Colosseum," *Biblical Archaeological Review* 27, no. 4 (September/October 2001): 20–32.

15. See The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, "Dedication of the Colosseum on a Coin," accessed January 22, 2024, https://www.imj.org.il/en/collections/549659-0; David B. Hendin, *Guide to Biblical Coins*, 6th ed. (New York: American Numismatic Society, 2021), 377–79.

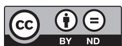
16. Werner Eck, "The Bar Kokhba Revolt: The Roman Point of View," *Journal of Roman Studies* 89 (November 1999): 81.

17. Cited in Moshe Gil, *A History of Palestine, 634–1099* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 837.

18. See Martin Gilbert, *Exile and Return: The Struggle for a Jewish Homeland* (Philadelphia and New York: J. B. Lippincott, 1978), 11.

19. Gilbert, *Exile and Return*, 19. I changed "Moslems" to "Muslims."

20. Y. Ben-Arieh, "The Growth of Jerusalem in the Nineteenth Century," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 65, no. 2 (June 1975): 262.



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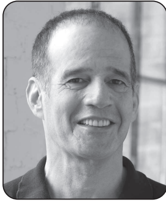

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