The Bible and Zionism: Invented Traditions, Archaeology and Post-colonialism in Palestine-Israel

Nur Masalha (2007)

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Back cover
Does the Bible justify Zionism? Since the foundation of the Israeli state in 1948, Torah and tank have become increasingly inseparable, resulting in the forced expulsion and subjugation of millions of indigenous Palestinians. Nur Masalha's groundbreaking new book traces Zionism's evolution from a secular settler movement in the late 19th century, to the messianic faith it has become today. He shows how the biblical language of 'chosen people' and 'promised land' has been used by many Christian and Jewish Zionists as the 'title deeds' for Israel, justifying ethnic division and violence. With Edward Said, Masalha argues that a new politics of peace can only be achieved through a single, democratic state, which replaces religious zealotry with secular equality.

About the Author
DR NUR MASALHA is a Senior Lecturer and Director of the Holy Land Research Project at St.Mary's College, University of Surrey, UK. He is Editor of "Holy Land Studies: A Multidisciplinary Journal". His books include: "Imperial Israel and the Palestinians" (2000); and "The Politics of Denial" (2003).

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This extraordinary book analyses the links between Biblical studies and Zionism. It shows how Zionism uses the Bible to justify the most appalling practices - war, genocide and racism.

For example, in 1980, Rabbi Yisrael Hess published an article in Bat Kol, ‘The Genocide Commandment in the Torah’, in which he wrote, "we shall all be called to this holy war, to this commandment of the annihilation of Amalek." He was writing about the Palestinians. He then approvingly quoted 1 Samuel 15.3, "kill man and woman, baby and suckling."

Again, "Our leaders should have entered Lebanon and Beirut without hesitation, and killed every single one of them", wrote Rabbi Yisrael Ariel, in Nekudah, 12 November 1982.

Dr Mordecai Nisan, a supporter of Gush Emunim (the settler movement which is the most influential Jewish fundamentalist movement in Israel) wrote, "it is likely that a sharp and extreme solution will be raised as a remedy to the Arab plague that afflicts the country." Imagine the reaction if a Palestinian leader referred to 'the Jewish plague'. Racism, it would seem, is a religious duty, ordained by God.

Zeev Herzog, Professor of Archaeology at Tel Aviv University and director of its Institute of Archaeology, wrote, "Following 70 years of extensive excavations in the Land of Israel, archaeologists have found out: The patriarchs' acts are legendary, the Israelites did not sojourn in Egypt or make an exodus, they did not conquer the land. Neither is there any mention of the empire of David and Solomon ..."

So it is wrong to treat the Bible as a historical record, and even more wrong to treat it as a source of legal title. How could an alleged word from a mythical deity trump 1,400 years of Palestinians living in Palestine?

The great Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides defined 'who is a Jew' in terms of faith choice (not of national, racial or ethnic affiliation), contradicting the Zionist principle of ethnic and racial separation. The facts refute the supremacist and essentialist notion of the Jews as a divinely 'chosen people', with a God-given right to a promised land.

Needs editing

This could be an excellent or even seminal analysis of religious (Christian and Jewish) Zionism and its defining influence upon the relationship between Israel and the Palestinians.

It handles a greater breadth of material than, for example, Stephen Sizer or Colin Chapman's works, especially in the scope of its historical enquiry. It is not a churchman's view, but an academic historian's. Hence it also makes intelligible Zionism's seemingly bizarre transition from a secular colonialist movement with its roots in 19th Century Europe into a messianic and militaristic movement whose radical extreme exists not so far beneath the radar of mainstream Israeli politics.

Masalha also provides a useful portrait of the place of fundamentalist literalist hermeneutics in Western biblical studies, and the role of its prejudices in informing everything from archaeology to British and American foreign policy. Most usefully, it goes further than any other book on Christian Zionism in critiquing the Orientalist assumptions of its zealous or nominal adherents.

However, there are a number of niggling problems with it, the blame for which should probably be shared between author and publisher. In addition to the typo trouble, I doubt the book has a tendency to get stuck in cul-de-sacs of evidence which, though interesting, appear tangential, and sometimes require slightly cumbersome exit strategies. Worse, there are two or three passages that repeat themselves practically verbatim.

I'm also not sure the author helps the reader to get to the heart of characters such as the 7th Lord Shaftesbury by simply writing them off as "bible-bashers", a somewhat grotesque and anachronistic dismissal of an important historical figure.

This notwithstanding, the material in the book is invaluable to the serious scholar of Zionist history and politics, and could, with some ruthless editing, be one of the most important publications relating to the region this decade.

Interesting analysis of complex issues

This book is about how the Bible has been manipulated in order to build support for Zionism, the creation of the state of Israel, the subsequent dispossession of the Palestinian people and to delegitimise Palestinian rights.

It's well written and easily read.

Masalha documents how support for Israel among the Christian Right in America today mirrors support among British Protestants of the nineteenth century. How some of the biggest gentle supporters of Zionism are actually to be found amongst people who are otherwise anti-semites. Masalha locates this commonality in the obsession with Biblical prophecy and Armageddon theory.

There is a chapter covering the better known Zionist attempts to use the Bible to justify their politics. Modern historical research is used in other chapters to effectively challenge Zionist interpretations of Maimonides as a Zionist which I found new and informative.

Other chapters cover the challenge of modern archaeology and scholarship, particularly of the so-called Biblical minimalists, to the historicity of the Bible. There is also a discussion on alternative Liberation Theology interpretations of the Bible which do not mobilise support for Zionism.

All very interesting, informative and important. The line of argument is, however, flawed I believe. America supports Israel and Britain supported Jewish settlement in Palestine previously, because they had strategic interests rather than because of religion.