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On: 18 April 2015, At: 14:14

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954

Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament: An International Journal of Nordic Theology

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/sold20>

The Zionist Bible: Biblical Precedent, Colonialism and the Erasure of Memory

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Published online: 17 Apr 2015.



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To cite this article: Emanuel Pfoh (2015) The Zionist Bible: Biblical Precedent, Colonialism and the Erasure of Memory, Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament: An International Journal of Nordic Theology, 29:1, 152-155, DOI: [10.1080/09018328.2015.1025554](https://doi.org/10.1080/09018328.2015.1025554)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09018328.2015.1025554>

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Book Review

Nur Masalha, *The Zionist Bible: Biblical Precedent, Colonialism and the Erasure of Memory* (BibleWorld; Durham: Acumen Publishing, 2013), vii + 295 pp. ISBN 978-1-84465-657-8.

The exposition of the political implications of biblical scholarship is nowadays not a novelty, especially since the publication in 1996 of K.W. Whitelam's *The Invention of Ancient Israel: The Silencing of Palestinian History*. However, it is not usual to find a book making so direct and bold statements, yet argued and sustained by facts and bibliography, such as the present work under review. Nur Masalha is not a biblical researcher, but a scholar of the modern Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He has, however, managed to survey the current state of Old Testament historical studies and shows how the biblical past that scholars attempt to reconstruct was used to support or legitimize contemporary political, economic, ideological and social conditions and realities in Israel/Palestine. In this sense, Masalha's book aligns itself with the critical line of scholarship started by Whitelam: if Whitelam exposed how modern Western biblical scholarship was tainted by the ideological and political present, this book rather expands the argument on the reception and the impact of Western and especially Israeli biblical imagination on Palestinian lives throughout the twentieth century.

A long Introduction (pp. 1-49) opens the discussion, summarizing a number of interrelated themes and questions later developed in the following chapters and referring to a copious bibliography, in order of mention: historical roots and biblical rights to the land, research paradigms and changes in biblical studies, biblical landscapes and the colonialist imagination, the displacing power of the biblical text, the Bible and collective identity-fashioning, the conversion of the Turkic Khazars and the Yiddish People, the nineteenth-century nationalist myth of Jewish ethnicity, the ethno-racial nationalism of Zionism, Jewish restorationism and the conquest of Palestine, ethno-linguistic Jewish nationalism, the creation of the New Hebrew Man (the *sabra*).

Chapter 1 "Framing the Conflict: Instrumentalizing the Hebrew Bible and Settler-Colonialism in Palestine" (pp. 51-71) critiques first Theodor Herzl's, the father of political Zionism, plan for the Jewish colonization of Palestine. Together with the presence of the German Templers, a nineteenth-century Protestant millennialist sect, in Palestine, Jewish colonization represented the progressive foreign takeover of Palestinian land. Settler-colonialism in Palestine was later favoured, with the creation of the State of Israel, by the interest in Israeli universities on the presence of the Latin Crusaders in medieval

times and the German Templers, which would constitute examples of foreign presence in the land with positive outcomes (just as Zionist colonization) and that would also reinforce the Israeli occupation of the territory, while ignoring or denying the Palestinian reality.

Chapter 2 “Promised Land and Conquest Narratives: Zionism and the 1948 Nakba” (pp. 73-113) offers a critique of how Zionism, as a secular nationalist movement of European origin, employed biblical images in order to colonize the land of Palestine and later dispossess its native peoples in what is referred to as the 1948 “catastrophe” (*nakba*), in opposition to what Israelis called the Independence War. Biblical references to the violent conquest of the land (i.e., the book of Joshua) and to what nowadays would count as ethnic cleansing, would offer some kind of legitimation for the modern Zionist conquest of Palestine, notwithstanding the fact that these biblical notices should not be taken at face value, in a historical sense, and more importantly, in spite of the serious moral challenge its literal interpretation creates.

Chapter 3 “Archaeology as Civic Religion: Secular Nationalist Ideology, Excavating the Bible and the De-Arabization of Palestine” (pp. 115-144) explores further the political use of the ancient past from the early years of the State of Israel up to 1967, especially by means of archaeological and geographical knowledge of the land, as a key instance in nation-building and national self-perception. In this process, in which the intervention of individuals like David Ben-Gurion, Benjamin Mazar, Yigael Yadin and Moshe Dayan was pivotal, a secularized perception of the biblical Israelites together with a strong militarization of society are the leading factors. The creation of Bible-oriented museums and archaeological theme parks went hand in hand with the military occupation of the country, aiming as well at a progressive de-Arabization of the landscape and erasing the historical and cultural patrimony of the Palestinians.

In line with the previous chapter, Chapter 4 “Colonialist Imagination as a Site of Mimicry and Erasure: The Israeli Renaming Project” (pp. 145-194) exposes the strategies of Judaization of the Palestinian landscape since the creation of the State of Israel. Of chief relevance here is the renaming of Arabic place names in Palestine with Hebrew ones—at times attending to biblical references or simply homophony, at times to literal translations—which dates back to the 1920s in British Mandatory Palestine and with a previous antecedent in the research activities of the British Palestine Exploration Fund during the second half of the nineteenth century. Masalha considers too the change of personal names of key figures in Zionism and Israeli politics—from Eastern European names to Hebrew ones—as a necessary complement to the renaming of the topography of the country, in order to show not only the landscape as Jewish but also that the newcomers were essentially native to the land. Finally, the transformation of originally Muslim shrines into Jewish ones together with the alteration of the ecological landscape complete a set of measures that aim at presenting the European Jews as native to the land (“camouflage” and “mimicry” are the terms employed by Masalha) while, at

the same time, expropriating the Palestinian people materially but also symbolically.

Chapter 5 “God’s Mapmakers: Jewish Fundamentalism and the Land Traditions of the Hebrew Bible (1967 to Gaza 2013)” (pp. 195-222) continues narrating the development of the relationship between the Bible and Zionism: the secular understanding of the Zionist present as a direct continuation of the ancient biblical past was progressively transformed after the Six Days war of 1967 into a sacred relationship between the Jewish people and the Land of Israel. The rise of Jewish fundamentalism in Israel from that date on gave a new meaning to the question of the Palestinians in the land as well as to the fate of the Jewish society in a God-promised land. The growing predicament of Jewish messianism in Israeli society added an even more extremist and exclusivist character to the otherwise more secular, pre-1967 conflict of the State of Israel with the Palestinian inhabitants of the territory.

The Conclusion, “The New Scholarly Revolution, and Reclaiming the Heritage of the Disinherited and Disenfranchised Palestinians” (pp. 223-253), surveys the interpretative changes in biblical studies during the last forty years, and especially the results of “minimalist” biblical scholarship, in relation to the history of ancient Palestine and the historicity of biblical stories. In synthesis, Masalha argues that the deconstruction of biblically-oriented historical scenarios exposes the lack of legitimacy behind the Zionist occupation of the land and the expulsion of its native inhabitants, and he further notes that “[t]he same dispossessing instrumentalization of the Bible and the biblical heritage industry in the service of settler-colonialism has continued to dislodge the indigenous inhabitants of Palestine of much of their ancient history and heritage” (p. 253). Both that history and that heritage must be urgently recovered.

The book formally ends with the sections Notes (pp. 255-260), Bibliography (pp. 261-286) and a general Index (pp. 287-295).

It is hard for this reviewer to criticize a work with which he agrees on many, if not most issues. But if some criticism should be made, it would essentially have to do with the particular presentation of some of the arguments in each chapter of the book: some unnecessary paragraph in the middle of a page that interrupts the flow of the argumentation (for instance, on p. 85); the repetition of information already presented (at times verbatim) or of secondary details throughout the book, which makes the reading distracting, if not a little annoying, at times. In that sense, the book, in relation to this handful of sentences or paragraphs, should have been better proof-read. This, “redactional” criticism, however, is far from diminishing the importance of the subjects Masalha analyzes. As the author observes: “The debate about ‘ancient Israel’, biblical scholarship and biblical archaeology is also a debate about the modern State of Israel, most critically because in the eyes of many people in the West, the legitimacy of the Zionist project and Jewish ‘restorationism’ depends on the credibility of the biblical portrait.” (p. 155). This is the main strength of this work and Masalha has critically exposed such a relationship by using an abundant and up-to-date bibliography but also through a variety

of analytical approaches, all of which accounts for the complexity of the issues discussed in just one volume. Aside from this, I would add, the relevant issue in this whole discussion seems to be less the process of Israeli nation-building, the use of biblical images in the national self-perception and the “indigenization” of European Jews in Palestine *in itself* (such factors, taken in abstraction from this historical context, are actually common in most state- and nation-building processes), and more the victims of such national construction, namely the Palestinians, and their marginalization from the country and also from their cultural and historical patrimony by means of a Zionist-driven interpretation of the biblical past. Yet, as Masalha shows, it is difficult to isolate one aspect from the other; they are indeed interrelated.

In sum, this book should be seriously considered and discussed by everyone in the field of Old Testament scholarship. With this book, Masalha has successfully synthesized the current agenda for critically dealing with the history, the culture and the politics of Israel and Palestine as related to the ancient past of the region. Finally, from a wider perspective, this book shows why biblical scholarship should not remain an ivory tower discipline: its dealings affect directly or indirectly the real world in modern Israel/Palestine, and behind every analysis of the biblical text, especially when read *as history*, there are implications for those living in the land, with dread consequences for the Palestinian people.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09018328.2015.1025554>