

# Forum

## The Meaning of *Palestine*

TO THE EDITOR:

*Palestine* and *Palestinians* are loaded words, whose meaning has shifted throughout history. In his Forum letter responding to Olivia C. Harrison's article on Palestine as a metaphor in Maghrebi literature, "Cross-Colonial Poetics: *Souffles-Anfas* and the Figure of Palestine" (128.2 [2013]: 353–69), Basem L. Ra'ad proposes to enlarge the meaning of the words, taking Harrison to task for some of her analogies (129.2 [2014]: 274–76). What he does, however, is shrink the meaning, simplifying and omitting essential facts.

To give a fuller historical picture: in November 1947, the United Nations voted to partition British Mandatory Palestine into two independent states, Arab and Jewish. The plan was accepted by the Jewish representatives and rejected by the Arab side. When the mandate ended, in May 1948, the State of Israel was established based on international approval. The surrounding Arab states immediately invaded, blockading Jerusalem. Jordan occupied the West Bank. The unexpected survival of the new state led to the start of an Arab exodus, exacerbated by other causes still debated by historians.

Another shrinkage of the historical record is the "de-hebraizing" of the Holy Land. Aside from the monumental literary and linguistic accomplishment of the Hebrew Bible, the "most fine writing," as Jorge Luis Borges told me in an interview, there is abundant concrete evidence of Hebrew's presence from antiquity (Edna Aizenberg; *The Aleph Weaver* [Scripta Humanistica, 1984; print] 69). The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Masada texts, containing biblical and extrabiblical Hebrew literature, are major examples. Ostraca, seals, and coins, all bearing Hebrew inscriptions, provide additional corroboration.

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As for scriptural Hebrew narratives inspiring what Ra'ad calls "colonial projects" (276), we know as literary critics that any text can engender multiple readings. Hebrew Scripture inspired the African American slaves to resist their oppressors and the nascent United States to revolt against Great Britain.

The Middle East situation is complex, and it does no service to reduce it to one-sided simplifications.

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*Reply:*

Hardly a "loaded" word, *Palestine* has been the name of the country—what is now the state of Israel and other occupied parts of Palestine (Gaza and the "West Bank")—from at least the eighth century BCE, as Assyrian inscriptions show. Even earlier, in the time of Ramses III (twelfth century BCE), this general area was referred to as *Peleset*. Herodotus used *Palestine*, as did Aristotle, as did the occupying Greeks and Romans. Others continued to use it until 1948, and many, including Pope Francis, still do today. Eusebius of Caesarea is often called "the Palestinian," and both he and Saint Jerome thought they lived in Palestine.

It is "ancient Israel" that is the subject of dispute among historians today, who also question the historicity of Exodus and the Kingdom of David. I argued that "ancient Israel" and biblical stories about it, which insinuated themselves into Western consciousness for various reasons, be replaced by an enlarged, humanistic meaning for *Palestine*. Though slaves, forced to adopt Christianity and hear the Bible, identified with "let my people go!" and the crucifixion, it is nonetheless insidious to use a story like Exodus, or stories of succeeding massacres, as a model for both liberation and oppression, freedom for some and dispossession or slaughter for others. That converted former slaves and na-

tives continued to identify with these stories is a symptom of self-colonization. Edna Aizenberg mistakenly thinks Exodus inspired the American revolt against Great Britain. Instead, this and other biblical narratives were obsessions of Puritan colonists, who saw themselves as god's chosen people conquering a new "Canaan" and who leaned on biblical parallels to justify their "errand in the wilderness," to excuse their murder and dispossession of native populations.

As for Hebrew, it is not as old as people assume. I pointed out that its modern revival has mostly Arabic roots. Its script is commonly confused with more ancient languages in attempts to claim historical depth (often through the use of misleading hyphenation, such as "Hebrew-Canaanite" and "Hebrew-Aramaic"). Hebrew has many fossilized elements not "Semitic" in nature. It was used as a scholarly-religious script, mostly outside Palestine, and was dead in daily practice. *Hebrew* is a misnomer, suggesting links to the idealized "Hebrews" who could not have spoken "Hebrew." Its script is but an appropriation of late Imperial Square Aramaic. The population spoke and wrote Aramaic, as Jesus reportedly did. The ostraca and other inscriptions often described as ancient or paleo-Hebrew are "Phoenician" first and then Aramaic, the regional lingua franca.

Appropriation is a strategy to gain more regional entitlement. The Hebrew Bible is "fine" writing, though much of its founding content is recycled from regional mythological antecedents discovered over the past 150 years. The Bible is a Hellenistic-period extension of mythic-literary traditions originating in ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Greater Syria over millennia, which continued in other languages. Its earliest form, the Samaritan Pentateuch, borrowing heavily from this heritage as well as from Homeric and classical Greece, was adopted by Jews and expanded with other writings. The Bible therefore cannot be exclusively owned by one faith that relies on it, nor can its uses be extended to supporting land-ownership claims and to linking present