

## Thousands of Years of Nation-building? Ancient Arguments for Sovereignty in Bosnia and Israel/Palestine

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Sovereignty is not only a technical matter of international law, although it largely depends on external actors. Others outside a state have to accept the claim of sovereignty, otherwise it is worthless. On the other hand, however, there is a domestic dimension of sovereignty which involves the question of its *internal legitimacy*. The notion of and the desire for sovereignty can be more or less firmly rooted in the state's population or the so-called nation. For example, the demand has been quite feeble among Bosnian Muslims (Bosnjaks) after the collapse of Tito-Yugoslavia. At least, it has been relatively weaker than the competing ethno-national projects of Serbia and Croatia. In addition, it is a quite new phenomenon with the Bosnjaks – and it has been continuously challenged by its neighbours and the outside world.

The aspect of the internal legitimacy of sovereignty plays an important role for the ethno-national political elite when pursuing their political ideal of an own nation-state, particularly if this goal is challenged by external actors on the international level. It provides them with arguments for their political programme. Especially after the end of the Cold War and the melting of frozen political structures, the run of perceived ethno-nations for a state has picked up speed. There was not always a mass movement behind this endeavour. Therefore, a “national” historiography became ever more important.

But why is sovereignty such a big issue in the first place? The main reason is that world politics works with three basic assumptions: 1.) States are the dominant and sovereign actors in the so-called *international relations*. 2.) States hold the monopoly of power. 3.) Conflicts and interventions are fought and settled on state levels.<sup>1</sup> Against this background, Sulzbach once shaped his minimum definition of a nation: “A “nation” is [...] a group of people who demand an own state because of its sovereignty vis-à-vis other states”.<sup>2</sup> State sovereignty is the highest goal, sometimes the ideological motivation is even secondary.

Mayall and Simpson put it this way: “The state is often a valued prize in the competition between opposing ethnic and/or religious groups. The winners gain monopoly access to the outside world and the ability, therefore, to extract a rent from foreign

\* This article is based on a presentation for the conference “Nation-building Between National Sovereignty and International Intervention – Ex-Yugoslavia and the Middle East” of the Austrian Institute for International Affairs (OIIA) in Vienna, May 9th-10th 2003.

<sup>1</sup> See: Mickey/Albion, in: Devetak/Fiere/Seewann (1993), p. 63.

<sup>2</sup> Sulzbach (1969), p. 12.

governments, or private investors, during the process of modernization. [...] In other words, both the heterogeneous nature of post-colonial society and the international environment provide a fertile soil in which separatism and secession can propagate and flourish.<sup>3</sup>

The more a "nation's" potential or existing sovereignty is challenged, the deeper the nation-builders dig into the past to find ethno-national roots that are supposed to legitimize the present project. This technique is easy and very similar throughout the world regions. The effects, however, are quite different. So the ethno-national myths brought forward by Palestinians and Israelis are part of a story which has global dimensions and is threatening to split great parts of the world into two camps. Moreover, their myths are enshrined in one of the most powerful media that have ever existed - the Bible. In comparison, the ethno-national myth of Bosnian Muslims looks rather humble, although we all know the horrible effects of ethno-national historiography of Serbs, Croats and Bosnjaks leading up to and during the course of the Balkan war in the 1990s.

The examples of myths described and deconstructed in the following, serve one and the same purpose. They are supposed to shape the idea of a long-lasting ethnic continuity of a group of people the majority of whom consider themselves a nation in the German/"ethnic" sense and who claim the right to form and/or to sustain a nation-state in the actual international scenario. Ironically, these narratives go back further in time than the existence of the group's main means of contrast: religion (of course, religion in its pure form is not the reason, but a highly manipulated and politicized version of it). To put it in a pointed way: The origin of the "nation" is considered to be older than the main reason why this group is actually in strife with its neighbours.

### The Bogomil Myth in Bosnia-Herzegovina

With the final conquest of Bosnia (1463) and Herzegovina (1482) by the Ottomans the age of islamization of the region started. However, Islam in Bosnia-Herzegovina was mostly a traditional and rather unpolitical matter until modern times. It did not turn into an ethno-national feature which could have been easily turned into broad aspirations towards a nation-state. Some cite the economic backwardness of Bosnia as one of several reasons. Another explanation is that traditional Islam is hardly compatible with the idea of national sovereignty. It is more oriented towards the all-Islamic community (*umma*) instead of allowing smaller and rather hard units, which are fruits of European modern history, split the Muslims into different political camps.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, Islam in its origin follows a clearly supra-"ethnic" approach. This has had repercussions until today on Muslim political thinking, also in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Here lies one reason why the concept of "nation-states" is an alien element in the pre-

<sup>3</sup> Mayall/Simpson, in: A. Smith (1992), p. 7-8.

<sup>4</sup> On the debate of Islam and nation resp. nation-state, see Weisb, in: Weisb, in: Weisb (1986), p. 2ff. Tih (1987), Schimmel, in: Tullinder (1987) and, as a primary source, Khalidun (1958).

dominantly Muslim Middle East, too. It took shape only after the European colonial powers implanted it into the region.

The Islamic scepticism against secular subunits of the all-Islamic *umma* make it essential to distinguish Islamists and Muslim ethno-nationalists as two different streams. They are just lumped together in many Western eyes. However, it is this ethno-national diversion from Islam which plays a role here.

To underline the "ethnic" distinction of Bosnjaks vis-à-vis Orthodox Serbs and Catholic Croats, Muslim ethno-nationalists refer to the role of the old Bosnian church which is mostly called Bogomil. It is no coincidence that the Bogomil myth experienced a boost whenever the *Zeitgeist* suggested upgrading Bosnian Muslims as an ethno-nation - against the ethno-national competition which viewed the Muslims as converted but "ethnic" Serbs, Croats or even Turks. This was especially true in the Austro-Hungarian period of Bosnia-Herzegovina (from 1900 onwards) and later in Tito's Yugoslavia (from the 1960s onwards).

The myth is based on the presumption that today's Muslims in Bosnia-Herzegovina can derive their descent directly from the Bosnian nobility of the Middle Ages, an idea that had already established its identity through a church of its own - through Bogomilism.<sup>5</sup> Thus, it was able to protect itself from the appropriating attempts of the Orthodox Church and, above all, the Franciscans, who traditionally considered Bosnia-Herzegovina as their missionary area. After the final Ottoman conquest of Bosnia-Herzegovina, so the myth goes, the Bosnian nobility willingly and unanimously converted to Islam. Since the majority of the Bosnian population also consisted of Bogomils, they were also converted *en masse*. In this way they paved the way for consolidation of the Ottoman Empire. Simultaneously, they almost automatically rose to the status of a political ruling class as well as to a socially and tax-wise privileged class in Bosnia-Herzegovina.<sup>6</sup>

This version was advocated particularly by the communist Yugoslav and Muslim historian Atif Purivata (1928-2001). He intended to prove that Bogomils formed the "nucleus of Muslim nation-building."<sup>7</sup> His arguments came at a time when, in 1968 the Bosnian-Muslims in Yugoslavia were granted the suffix "in the national sense", and when in 1971 their status as a "nation" was embodied in the constitution. Purivata was convinced that "the overall socio-economic and particularly the cultural and political development of Moslems has affirmed them as a separate ethnic identity."<sup>8</sup> The thesis that today's Muslims descended directly from the Bogomil nobility replaces the Islamic faith as the only criterion of identity. Instead, the Bosnian Muslims were seen to be

<sup>5</sup> Fine, in: Pinson (1994), p. 11ff; Dzaja (1978; 1984), Miedlig (1994), p. 26ff; Höpken, in: Kappeler/Simon/Brunner (1989), p. 18ff. For a more detailed account on Bogomilism, refer to: Malcolm (1996) p. 27ff; Balic (1992), p. 90ff.

<sup>6</sup> The thesis postulated in such clear terms can be found particularly often in earlier treatises, for instance in: Ipsen, in: Markert (1954), p. 29ff; Slavrianos (1958), p. 63; Hadzijsahic (1962), in: SOF, 192 Purivata, in: Blagojevic (1974); Bauer (1971), p. 28, but surprisingly also in more recent works, for instance in: Bell-Fialkoff (1999), p. 124; Mannesland (1997); Hösch (1995), p. 83; Reuter (1992), in: SOE, p. 665; Meier, in: Schönfeld (1987), p. 127.

<sup>7</sup> Höpken, in: Kappeler/Simon/Brunner (1989), p. 182.

<sup>8</sup> Purivata, in: Blagojevic (1974), p. 307.

coming from an own age-old Bosnian culture. This is why, according to Purivata, the Muslims have to be strictly contrasted with the Turks, with whom they share religion only.<sup>9</sup> The Bogomil myth served as a counter-narrative to the appropriation attempts of the more advanced neighbouring ethno-national projects of Serbs and Croats.

However, this myth stands on shaky foundations, as recent research has shown. It brings the following arguments to bear:

- 1.) It is quite right that the Bosnian church had its own identity. At least it withstood the hierarchies of the Catholic and Orthodox churches outside Bosnia-Herzegovina. The country was not yet rigidly classified in terms of denominations. However, at the time of the Ottoman conquest the Bosnian church was already in decay.<sup>10</sup> It was not a state church either. Therefore, the existence of a widespread Bogomil upper strata is doubtful. The Bosnian *beys* (Muslim noble landlords) had various origins. They came a) only partly from the Bosnian nobility, b) from the *Knabenlese* – in this practice little boys were taken away from their parents at an early stage and raised forcefully in Islamic schools, c) from officials from Asia Minor, who were allotted land in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and d) from immigrants of different origins, like Hungarians, Croats, Slavonians, Dalmatians and Serbs.<sup>11</sup>
- 2.) In addition, the so-called “Bogomil treason” (the Bogomils had let the Ottomans into the country) turned out to be a “Bosnian stab-in-the back legend”, as Dzaja writes convincingly. A papal legate was at a loss for an explanation because of the defeat against the Sultan, and therefore manipulated his report.<sup>12</sup>
- 3.) The Bosnian state in general had begun to decay. Even before the Ottoman conquest the kingdom had to pay tribute to the Sultan. The country’s feudal structure was fragmented and caught in strife. The Bosnian rulers often called the Sultan as mediator and protector. That is why the conquest came quite easy to the Ottomans.<sup>13</sup>
- 4.) Members of *all* religious sects converted to Islam, not Bogomils alone.<sup>14</sup> Most of the “new Muslims” were therefore old-established Bosnians. Islamic believers did not immigrate to Bosnia-Herzegovina in large numbers. This also refutes the thesis (often used by Serb nationalists) that Bosnian Muslims were in fact Turks. Even though the leading Muslim clerics comprised Turks, Albanians, Tatars, Arabian Sunnites, and others, their number decreased consistently after the 15<sup>th</sup> century.
- 5.) There were no conversions *en masse* and hardly any under coercion (except for the *Knabenlese*). Conversions took place step by step and in different ways.<sup>15</sup>

9 Purivata, in: Blagojević (1974), p.317.

10 Dzaja (1984), p.28-29.

11 Dzaja (1978), p.69. He refers to research conducted by V. Cubrilovic in 1935 (from sources from the 15<sup>th</sup> century) which has been confirmed today.

12 Dzaja (1984).

13 Miedliff (1994), p.28; Balic (1992), p.33; Hondius (1968), p.43-44.

14 See in particular: Malcolm (1996), p.53; Dzaja (1978), p.69ff; Dzaja (1984), p.36ff; Birnbaum (1987), in: *WS*, p.14ff; Thomas, in: Thomas/Friman (1996), p.19.

15 This was first pointed out by the Bosnian researcher Nedim Filipovic. See in particular: Malcolm (1996), p.52; Dzaja (1978), p.72ff; Balic (1992), p.90ff. Lapidus (1988), p.309 refers to a census of 1520-30, according to which only 19 percent of the population in the Balkans were Muslim. In Bosnia-Herzegovina it was 45 percent. Everywhere most of the Muslims lived in cities.

Members of the political and military upper class were more ready to embrace Islam than the remaining population. For many Islamization had, first of all, just a “declaratory character”.<sup>16</sup> This means that they at best adopted a Muslim name. Many also had pragmatic reasons for their conversions, for example, because the church was further away than the mosque or because they hoped to win liberation from slavery, tax benefits or high posts. Islamization progressed faster in growing cities than in rural areas. A deepening of Islamic tradition, however, took many generations. Meanwhile, Muslims continued to pray in churches and kiss holy Christian symbols.<sup>17</sup> This is why Fine speaks of “acceptance” of Islam rather than “conversion”, as the life-styles remained by and large unchanged.<sup>18</sup>

Even Purivata had softened his stand on this issue when I talked to him in June 2000. About one year before his death he acknowledged the research by Srecko Dzaja in Small Balic. Today, he said, no scholar supports the Bogomil thesis in its pure version any more. Purivata suggested as a compromise that “we could say: *Most* Bogomil accepted Islam....Also Orthodox and Croats did.” Surprisingly, he did not even want to exclude the possibility of a multi-religious “nation” in Bosnia in the future, which deviated substantially from his standpoint so far. He said: “In Bosnia, religion, ethnicity and nation are the same in some way. [...] But a nation with different religion ... – maybe some day we will have this here, too. Who knows?”<sup>19</sup>

The latest research also questions whether the Bosnian church was affiliated to the Bogomil monastic order from Bulgaria at all. This was what particularly the Croatian historian Franjo Racki had claimed (in articles of 1869/70). In addition, the Bosnians themselves called each other *Kršijani* (Christians). Now, whether the Bosnians were partly Bogomils or rather followed an “archaic monastic church”<sup>20</sup> or displayed Catholic traits<sup>21</sup>, does not in any way affect the arguments above.

From today’s point of view it is much more interesting – and typical – the Racki’s theory had two *contemporary* rivals: One was represented by the Serb author Petranovic, who believed that the Bosnian church was in fact an apostate Serbia Orthodox one. On the other side, Catholic writers were convinced that the Bosnia church was indeed a branch of the Catholic one.<sup>22</sup> What this is supposed to mean in the context of religion-based nation-building is clear: The Bosnian Muslims are supposed to be either “Serbs” or “Croats”.

All in all, the Bogomil-thesis is in fact a dual myth which the latest research has refuted. First, the Bosnian Bogomil nobility did not convert to Islam “as one man” followed by the entire population. Second, the members of the medieval Bosnian church

16 Dzaja (1978), p.84.

17 Malcolm (1996), p.59.

18 Fine, in: Pinson (1996), p.19. See also: Lapidus (1988), p.309.

19 Purivata in an interview with the author in Sarajevo (June 27th 2000). He stated that in the 1960s, he only had available findings from the Yugoslav author Aleksandar Solovjev.

20 Steindorff (1997), in: *SOEM*, p.279. Malcolm (1996), p.27ff gives a detailed account of the doubts that exist in considering the church as “Bogomil”. He himself, however, abstains from any judgement.

21 This is Fine’s claim in: Pinson (1996), p.8.

22 Malcolm (1996), p.28-29; S. Ramet (1990), in: *SSJ*, p.5.

of were not Bogomils at all. The whole argument boils down to this: The Bosnian church was one – but only *one* – factor which left its mark on the Islamization of Bosnia-Hercegovina. The Bogomil myth is a “historically unsustainable attempt” to construct a Muslim nation-building similar to that of the Serbs and Croats.<sup>23</sup> The statement that “the Ottoman occupation encountered an already established people of Bosnians [...]”,<sup>24</sup> which continued unhindered, must therefore be placed into the realm of ethno-national legends. The Ottomanization represented rather an institutional break for Bosnia.<sup>25</sup>

The refutation of the Bogomil-myth means: “The Muslims” in Bosnia-Hercegovina do not have a longer ethnic and social continuity than their neighbours. The retrospective ethno-national attempts of appropriation of the Bosnian church (from which side ever) aim at revealing primordial factors that establish, categorize and instrumentalize “the Bosnian Muslims” as an “ethnic group”.

Since the Serb and Croatian ethno-nationalisms have had a longer and stronger tradition, the Bogomil myth of ethno-national Bosnjaks can be seen as part of a reactive nationalist endeavour. In this regard, there is a parallel to Palestinian ethno-nationalism as a reaction to Zionism.

Who came first to the “Holy Land”?

Being at war with one another in the streets and dry hills of the Middle East is one thing. In addition, however, Israeli and Palestinian ideologues make use of the weapons of historiography more than almost anywhere else in the world. Similarly to the Balkans, the bone of contention is who was the first one on this soil, and who thus has a right to claim a state territory including political and “national” sovereignty.

In April 2002, when the Israeli Offensive Defensive Shield was in full swing in the occupied territories, two statements displayed this argumentative circle very well. Replying to the demand of Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon that he should go into exile, the Palestinian leader Yassir Arafat in his besieged headquarters in Ramallah responded angrily: “Is this my homeland or his? We [Palestinians] were here before the Prophet Abraham. Don't the Israelis know the history?”<sup>26</sup>

In August 1996, Palestinians from all over the West Bank gathered in the city of Sabastiyah to revive the legend of Ba'al, the Canaanite god of the sky and fertility. Palestinians, even if slowly, have learned from the Israelis to use archaeology for present purposes of nation-building. So the Al-Quds-University in Jerusalem demands from all students, no matter of which faculty, to attend seminars on the archaeological history of Palestine, of which the Canaanites were an important part. Marwan Abu Khalaf, the director of the archaeological institute of this university stated: “Our

23 Höpken, in: Kappeler/Simon/Brunner (1989), p. 182.

24 Hadzihalic (1962), in: SOF, p. 178.

25 Dzaja (1984), p. 40.

26 Quote from DFA, press coverage by the author, Tel Aviv, April 2002.

customs and traditions trace back to the Canaanites. Did you know that the Canaanites were actually Arabs? They came for the search of water from the Arabian . Abraham followed only 2000 years later.”<sup>27</sup>

Shortly after Arafat's statement in April 2002, Sharon's foreign policy adviser, Danni Ayalon, underlined in a TV-interview: “We are no occupiers. We live in a God-given land.”<sup>28</sup> He said further that today's Israel was the product of 4000 years of Jewish nation-building. On the internet-page of the Israeli government one can also read that the Jewish people became a “nation” in the 17th century B.C., when Abraham settled in the region known as Canaan.

Both sides are turning in circles within the same paradigm of “ancient ethnicity”. In the Israeli case, it is complemented by the dogma of a “God-given land” to be turned into a political territory. The Palestinian archeologist Adel Yachia has pointed to the nonsense of this game in an interview in 2002: “When people die through suicide bombers in buses or fight each other bloodily in the West Bank, it is stupid to argue about who was first 4000 years ago.” By means of historiography, he complained, Israelis justify the expulsion of the Palestinians from their homeland. “For the Jews, history has become their second religion.” The Palestinians themselves, he said, don't have to go so far back in history as Arafat does. Most of them were expelled only 50 years ago after the foundation of the Israeli state.<sup>29</sup>

However, most Palestinian political leaders fall into the same trap of almost pre-historic justification. Bernard Lewis draws parallels to other cases in the Middle East: “Had the Jews disappeared like most of the peoples of antiquity, the Palestinians might have claimed to be the heirs of ancient Israel, as the Egyptians were of the pharaohs and the Iraqis of the kings of Babylon. But the Jews had not disappeared and were even returning, and the Palestinians therefore sought their legitimacy in the pre-Israelite inhabitants of Palestine, the Canaanites.”<sup>30</sup>

The discussion that Palestinians descend directly from the Canaanites and Israelis from the Israelites as a “chosen people” has been going on for a long while and has been nurtured by the writings of the Bible authors. However, the most recent research from Israeli and international archaeologists and Bible scholars has started to seriously damage the narratives on which the Zionist ideology is based – and consequently the Palestinian counterpart as well.

Starting out from the bone of contention – the Biblical story – the myth of the ancient Jewish nation, roughly speaking, goes as follows:

The twisted narrative of a family dynasty turned into a “Jewish nation” is concentrated in the first five books or the books of Moses, called Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, also known as the Old Testament for Christians or the Tora for Jews. It all began with Abraham who is, of course, a key figure for Jews,

27 Marcus (2001), p. 114.

28 Quote from DFA, press coverage by the author, Tel Aviv, April 2002.

29 Yachia in an interview with the author, Ramallah 10.05.2002.

30 Lewis (1998), p. 74.

Christians and Muslims alike. He is said to have moved, on the order of God, from Ur in Mesopotamia to the "promised land" of Canaan. He went to Hebron, where some of the most radical representatives of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict live today.

Adherents from all three religions cherish holy sites connected with the patriarch Abraham reaching from Baghdad via Turkey and Syria to Israel/Palestine. His life and surrounding stories have been dated back to the Bronze Age (2000 to 1550 before the Christian Era). According to the Bible, Abraham founded a family whose members were engaged in dramas of jealousy, especially his grandsons. One of them, Joseph, was sold as a slave by his brothers to merchants who were on their way to Egypt. There, Joseph made an unexpected career as a minister to the pharaoh and was finally reconciled with his brothers. The clan continued to live in Egypt where the proto-Israelites became enslaved again and started their history as a "nation", at least so the Bible claims.

A central part of the mythical Jewish nation-building is the exodus from Egypt, allegedly around 1260 or 1250 B.C. Under the guidance of Moses, some 600 000 proto-Israelites escaped the yoke of the pharaoh and start a 40-year-long odyssey through the desert northwards. According to the Bible and many of its interpreters, this experience finally welded them into a fully-fledged nation – a nation that established an "eternal bond" with God (*Ahwe*). He handed the Ten Commandments carved into stone plates over to them. The proto-Israelites carried them through the desert in the Ark of the Covenant, which has become a core national symbol.

The next step is the alleged conquest of Canaan which has been dated between 1250 to 1225 B.C.. As the myth goes, after the desert march the early Israelite tribes crossed the Jordan towards the west, conquered the "holy land" in bloody battles, extinguished the Canaanites and their culture, and established their own nationhood there. In the Bible, the difference between the Canaanites and the Israelites was that the former worshiped idols, celebrated sex orgies, and drank alcohol, whereas the latter led a virtuous and monotheistic life.

In the end, as the myth goes on, the Israelites created a powerful and homogeneous kingdom with David and then Solomon as their leaders. Great temples, monuments and city fortifications were allegedly built during this time. In modern terms, this is depicted as a Jewish nation-state with one king, one territory, one national God. Following this argumentation, this construct is the predecessor of the present Erez Israel. In this paradigm, the Zionist movement did not create anything new in the 20<sup>th</sup> century but carried on where the Israelites left off.

This is the core argumentation which leads to the claim of sovereignty in the age of so-called nation-states and classic international law. Of course, there are a lot of modern situational ingredients in Israeli nation-building, like the Holocaust as the climax of a series of pogroms against Jews throughout Europe. But the ethno-national myths enshrined in the Tora have delivered the ideological material to keep pace with the modern European phenomena of nationalism that works with the same tools. In this way, the discourse within the Zionist movement at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was diverted from a pragmatic concept of statehood with different territorial options, even such as Uganda, towards an ethnic concept of nation combined with the irrefu-

table notion of a "holy land" turned into a modern – and, of course, highly disputable – territory. The striving for state sovereignty began to take on a sacred character.

It took some 2000 years for the myths of the Bible to be effectively challenged. A recent wave of research by Bible scholars and archaeologists has led to a heated debate regarding long-held dogmas. Some even compare the findings of the 1990s at 2000s and the connected publications to the bursting of a dam.<sup>31</sup>

Roughly speaking, there are now three camps that represent different degrees of criticism, and that hold different views of the Bible's age. The *traditionalists* claim that the main texts came to be at around 1000 B.C.. They still consider the Bible as history book. The *moderates* think that it was written and published around 600 B.C. One of the most influential representatives of this stream is Israel Finkelstein, head of the archaeological institute of the university of Tel Aviv.<sup>32</sup> The moderates question some core claims of the Bible but, like Finkelstein, many remain in the ethno-national paradigm. The most critical scholars, who depict the Bible as prevalently unhistorical are known as *minimalists* or *revisionists* or the *Copenhagen School*. They hold the Bible to be a "Hellenistic opus", written after 330 B.C. and therefore after the death of the Greek philosophers Socrates and Plato.<sup>33</sup> Their thorough deconstruction of Biblical and hence Zionist myths have brought them overwhelming criticism up to the point of charging them with anti-semitism. Their studies have been even equalled with the denial of the holocaust.<sup>34</sup>

The main points of the minimalists and moderates are the following:

- 1) A long list of contradictions and discrepancies between the narrative and archaeological findings has made them doubt the existence of Abraham, and, more importantly, about the exodus from Egypt. According to the latest research, there was no ethnically different, proto-Jewish, diaspora in Egypt, no odyssey through the desert and probably no Moses at all.<sup>35</sup>
  - 2) Given the above, there was no conquest of Canaan. Instead, the origins of the ancient Israelites cannot be traced in Egypt but in Canaan itself. This renders the claims of the modern ethno-nationalists that Palestinians are the direct offspring of the Canaanites and the Israelites from the Israelites absurd.
- Many places that were conquered by the Israelites according to the Bible, the most famous one among them being Jericho, were neither occupied nor destroyed. The walls were not fortified in the first place, as the Bible authors claim in order to paint the battle of the Israelites in heroic colours. Archaeological findings rather support the

31 Dirk Kinnet, scholar of Biblical languages at the university of Augsburg, according to: "Der Ier Thron", in: *Der Spiegel* 52/2002.

32 See particularly his recent book written with Neil Asher Silberman: *The Bible Unearthed* (2001) [Keil Posaanen vor Jericho (2003)].

33 "Der Ier Thron", in: *Der Spiegel* (52/2002), p. 138.

34 More on this stream in Marcus (2001), p. 145ff. The debate was sparked by Philip R. Davies, professor of the university of Sheffield in England with his book "In Search of 'Ancient Israel'".

35 Not even Israeli archaeologists who went out to collect proofs of their national narrative found indications of an Israelite exodus from Egypt when they dugged about in the Sinai peninsula between 1961 and 1982, when Israel held that piece of land. Marcus (2001), p.95ff. See also: Finkelstein/Silberman (2003), p. 73ff; "Der Ier Thron", in: *Der Spiegel* (52/2002), p.141.

thesis of a gradual but distinct social transformation in the land of Canaan, instead of one ethnic group supplanting another one in a quick and cruel conquest.<sup>36</sup> Marcus hits the point when she writes: "To differentiate Israelites from Canaanites is so difficult because Israelites and Canaanites were one and the same people."<sup>37</sup> Even if the Israelites were peaceful immigrants, as one theory goes<sup>38</sup>, they had taken over many customs from the Canaanites, including rural religious practices, some of which later developed into Jewish holidays like Sukkoth, Passah and Shabuoth. Syncretisms were common and lasted for a much longer period of time than the Bible would have its readers believe. Jahwe himself is considered to have been part of a Canaanite cult of fertility, one of many varieties of the Canaanite weather god Baal. Over a long period, the people sacrificed other Canaanite gods to Jahwe.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, it is almost impossible to distinguish between ethnic groups when it comes to religious practices. Another source of evidence could be bones. Some scholars like Finkelstein draw on the ban of pork to make out a "specific Israeli ethnicity". Others, however, dismiss this indicator, since most other tribes in these regions abstained from pork as well.<sup>40</sup>

It is the minimalists who most strongly doubt the account of a great religious reform which later led to the ethno-national formula of one God, one nation, one territory. In their view, the great cultural reform of a king called Josiah, who allegedly eradicated all polytheisms, is just another exaggeration from later times. Around 600 B.C., there were still no religious differences between the people living in Judah (in today's southern Israel) and the surrounding populations.<sup>41</sup>

- 3) During the time of David and Solomon in the 10<sup>th</sup> century B.C. the region was still not very developed. The settlements were small villages, including Jerusalem.<sup>42</sup> Life was rural and simple. Archeological findings have not revealed any indications of great monuments or flourishing cities. Even the early construction of a great and central temple on today's Temple Mount has turned out to be a myth. There are no archeological hints so far even for the second temple built after the alleged destruction of the first one by the Babylonians in 515 B.C.

The German archeologist, Gunnar Lehmann from the Beersheva University, is convinced that the Israelites were by far not the "core people" of this region as the Bible claims. Instead, they were economically dependent on the tribes living in the more developed and fertile coastal areas. "Consequently, David was rather a vassal of the hostile Philistines", Lehmann argued. Another irony was that Solomon could never be

36 Finkelstein/Silberman (2003), p. 86ff; 104ff, p. 123.

37 Marcus (2001), p. 100 (own re-translation).

38 An overview of the different theories can be found in: Finkelstein/Silberman (2003), p. 117ff.

39 Marcus (2001), p. 104, 105. She falls back on findings from the archeologist Amnon Ben-Tor.

40 Finkelstein/Silberman (2003), p. 136; Marcus (2001), p. 35, 37.

41 According to the Bible scholar Herbert Niehr: "Der leere Thron", in: *Der Spiegel*(52/2003), p. 144.

42 Finkelstein/Silberman (2003), p. 309ff.  
43 Finkelstein/Silberman (2003), p. 141. The minimalist Gunnar Lehmann in an interview with the author, December 6th, 2002, in Jerusalem.

invited into any Jewish house nowadays, since "he did so many unkosher things in his life. For example, he had non-Jewish wives."<sup>43</sup>

For some time, the minimalists even believed that David and Solomon did not exist at all, until inscriptions were discovered in northern Israel in 1993 that mention their dynasty.<sup>44</sup> Despite this, critical Bible scholars and archeologists believe that the achievements of both figures have been highly exaggerated. They are also convinced that the kingdom of David and Solomon was split from the beginning into two different communities. There was neither a centralized state structure nor a homogeneous culture, let alone a great empire. According to Finkelstein, the northern entity named Israel may have come close to a state, while the southern bit of Judah tended to be poorer and lagged some 200 years behind in development. It was shortly after Solomon's death (around 931 B.C.), that the two parts disengaged completely and created different histories.<sup>45</sup> The only explanation the Bible gives for the decay of Solomon's "great empire" is religious blasphemy and polytheism.

The Biblical description of two brotherly states with a common ethnic, cultural and religious heritage does not fit the reality according to this research. Although both parts had several things in common, such as a similar language, the same script and the worship of Jahwe as a god, there were many obvious differences. Marcus states: "As to culture, political development, settlement structure and climate, Judah had more in common with Edom in southern Jordan than with Israel."<sup>46</sup>

The myth of the Golden Age of David and Solomon has been refuted. There are no indications to believe that the two ruled any kind of advanced state structure with a central government, not to mention a single empire, or even a nation-state.<sup>47</sup> Indications of a highly developed administration, like seals or inscriptions, can be found only a hundred years later, at a time when the neighbouring kingdoms of Moab and Damascus also began to consolidate. Another fact which supports this thesis is that the alleged high culture, the great political and architectural achievements of David and Solomon, are not mentioned in Egyptian or Mesopotamian texts.<sup>48</sup> Strangely enough, they also went unnoticed by the great Hellenistic writers.<sup>49</sup>

All this speaks against the establishment of an early Jewish "nation-state" whose existence could be instrumentalized in favour of some form of historical continuity (with interruptions) to today's modern state of Israel. The second argument against it comes, of course, from the history of ideas: Nationalism, nation-building and nation-states are distinctly modern phenomena, only making their appearance after the French Revolution.

43 Lehmann in an interview with the author on December 6th, 2002, in Jerusalem.

44 The discovery became known as the inscriptions in the "House of David". Finkelstein/Silberman (2003), p. 145-146.

45 Finkelstein/Silberman (2003), p. 168, 171ff; Marcus (2001), p. 143.

46 Marcus (2001), p. 161 (own re-translation).

47 Marcus (2001), p. 142; Finkelstein/Silberman (2003), p. 148, 159, 167. Lehmann in an interview with the author on December 6th, 2002.

48 Finkelstein/Silberman (2003), p. 145.

49 "Der leere Thron", in: *Der Spiegel* (52/2002), p. 144.

However, with the escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the argument of continuity is increasingly used even by liberal Israeli historians like Benny Morris from the Ben Gurion University in Beersheva. He holds that, in contrast to the Muslims, the Jews had had their own statehood since Saulus, and later under David and Solomon, until the second and final defeat against the Romans in the second century A.D. The Muslims or Palestinians, in turn, had no such pre-history and derived their (counter-)identity from the Zionist movement and increasing Jewish immigration at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century ( – the second half of the statement being basically true). Morris holds this view, however, as a secular Zionist, to be independent of the notion of a divine destiny: “I just doubt the god-given aspect [of the story], since I don’t know if God exists.”<sup>50</sup>

When it comes to explaining the motives of the Bible’s distortions, the moderates and the minimalists offer different explanations. The moderate critics like Finkelstein hold that the script served as propaganda material for the religious-political leadership of Judah which did not start to develop before the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C. After the more developed northern entity of Israel had been conquered and annexed by the Assyrians (in 723/722 B.C.), southern Judah with its capital Jerusalem gradually grew into this power vacuum. The more developed Israel had always been a political competitor. Therefore, it was played down by the Bible authors who depicted Judah as the obedient God chosen entity, whereas the people and dynasties of Israel were described as blasphemous and outrageous. The project of the Bible during Judah’s rise was to centralize the religious cult, to create a common identity, and – in quite far-fetched and modern terminology as used by Finkelstein – to establish a “national history”. It starts as early as Abraham who was deliberately placed as living in Hebron, in later Judah.

This process intensified more than half a century after the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem (587/586 B.C.) under Nebukadnezar, when the scholar Esra and the administrator Nehemia returned from the so-called Babylonian captivity<sup>51</sup> and began a political and religious revival of the town. The laws were strictly tailored according to Deuteronomy. From this time on, the Jewish religion cut itself off from the surrounding people and acquired ethnic or even racial traits. Mixed marriages were forbidden and the difference of the Jewish people vis-à-vis their neighbours was strongly emphasized.<sup>52</sup> The Bible was revised once again, and in retrospect Jerusalem appeared in the limelight of all events.

Minimalists give a different reason for the Bible authors’ intentions. According to them, it was the Makkabeans (or Hasmoneans) who finally revised the “holy book” for their needs. After the Babylonians (and later the Persians) reigned over the region, Alexander the Great conquered Judah in 332 B.C. This was followed by the reigns of several tribes until the Jewish Makkabeans won a long civil war and established

50 Morris in an interview with the author on May 10th, 2002.

51 Doubts about the Biblical account of a deportation of the whole Jewish “nation” can be found in Marcus (2001), p. 189ff.

52 See also Finkelstein/Silberman (2003), p. 322. This concept stands very much in contrast to Islam which has a distinctly supra-racial and more inclusive approach.

their state in 141 B.C. The German theologian, Bernd Jörg Diebner, considers this a the moment when the dream of the great pan-Israelite empire was born as the central thread in the Bible texts.<sup>53</sup>

In the present struggle for national sovereignty in the Middle East, the theses of the moderate and minimalist critics have naturally provoked an echo on the Palestinian side as well. As one example, Lehmann told me, that whenever Palestinian student of archeology hear about the deconstructive method of the minimalists, they are enthusiastic about it, “until I started to turn the tables and did the same with the content of the Koran.” As soon as this happened, they cried: “No, you can’t do this, the Koran is holy!” Lehmann said: “This leads to the point that we will never understand each other. The discourses run totally cross.” He also complained that most Palestinian: see archeologists still as their enemies and intruders because they suspect them supporting an expansionist Zionist cause. “They are afraid that we take away their [national] legitimacy.” In the Middle East, archaeology is indeed a very political matter and a “national” task in most countries. The Palestinian authority also understood this and founded their own ministry of archeology shortly after the Oslo peace accord in 1993.<sup>54</sup>

This does not mean, however, that there has been any meaningful academic progress. Lehmann recalls another group of Palestinian archeology students with whom he visited the Wailing Wall and the Temple Mount. They insisted that everything they saw was built by the Islamic caliphs, even the lower layers that are older than Islam itself. “This was very depressing”, Lehmann said. “Empiricism does not count at all.” Only one by one did they admit, when the others were not listening, that Lehmann might be right. They were just afraid to say this in front of the group and back home in front of their professors.<sup>55</sup>

The national myths and taboos on both sides have also made the Temple Mount or Haram Al-Sharif principally undividable. Religious and ethno-national zealotry has made many peace rounds fail, and even created new vocabulary in the field of international law. During the desperate negotiation attempts between the former Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak, Palestinian leader Yassir Arafat and former U.S. president Bill Clinton in Maryland in summer 2000 and in the Egyptian resort of Taba in January 2001, the Temple Mount once again crystallized as the core problem. Since religious and ethno-national sovereignty are so closely connected, no side was ready to give in on this symbolic issue. Several options were discussed, for example a common Palestinian trust administration over this tiny bit of land. In the end, the Israelis made concessions in so far as they wanted to accept Palestinian sovereignty over the upper layers of the Temple Mount with the Dome of the Rocks and the Al-Aqsa Mosque. The lower stones, however, should be under Israeli “sovereignty” as part of the Jewish national heritage and history. The surprising notion of a *vertical sovereignty* was a novum in international law and obviously an unfulfillable demand.

53 “Der leere Thron”, in: *Der Spiegel* (52/2002), p. 147

54 Marcus (2001), p. 24.

55 Lehmann in an interview with the author on December 6th, 2002, in Jerusalem.

Next to this issue there also remained a horizontal problem. A contentious point of the Clinton proposal was if it envisaged the 57 meter long Wailing Wall only as Israeli sovereign territory or the whole 470 meter long Western wall of the Temple Mount. A solution of the bloody and long conflict literally depended on meters and centimeters of "holy" old stones in a city which has changed its prevailing faith a dozen times in history.

The fight about ethno-national sovereignty in Israel and Palestine consists of literally all three topographic dimensions. It is about conventional as well as symbolic territory due to an exceptionally close connection between land and religious myths that have turned into indispensable sources of ethno-national state legitimization. This conflict will remain a vicious circle as long as both sides stick to the same paradigm of historical argumentation. Both sides claim the same spots of land as the core of their ethno-national existence.

With the question of who was first in the "holy land", they even end up claiming to be descendants of the same people who used to live in this area, as the recent research has shown. Given the manifold tribes, peoples and cultures that have lived in this region at that time, the argument that today's Israelis, with their extremely colourful ethnic backgrounds from all over the world, are direct descendants from the Israelites, and the Palestinians, with their young history of nation-building, are an offspring of the Canaanites, is historical nonsense. Put into a European context, this problem appears equally absurd, as Lehmann points out: "You could also ask: Are the Germans actually Teutons, Alemanni or Celts?" For this reason, he recommends a look ahead instead. A reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians could be only possible with a changed historiography and new school books. This also worked with the former archenemies France and Germany. "From this example we can learn a lot here in the Middle East", Lehmann said.<sup>56</sup>

However, even the very critical publications show how deeply rooted the ethno-national paradigm still is. A stunning example is Finkelstein's and Silberman's book. At the same time as they deconstruct central Biblical myths, they stick to the terminology of a Jewish nation-building from Biblical times onwards. At least they don't distance themselves from these claims as much as they use the term "nation" in a surprisingly unreflective way. For example, Finkelstein and Silberman refer to a "nation" which grew out of Jacob's clan, the grandson of Abraham<sup>57</sup>, a "nation" which was enslaved in Egypt<sup>58</sup>, and which established itself in Canaan. They describe the society in Judah as one that has "developed a clear national consciousness".<sup>59</sup> Sentences like the following nurture the belief in legends and some kind of unique Jewish destiny, when Finkelstein and Silberman refer to the Babylonian conquest of Judah in 597 B.C. with the subsequent destruction of the temple in Jerusalem: "The religion and national existence of the people of Israel could have ended in this great disaster. Miraculously,

<sup>56</sup> Lehmann in an interview with the author on December 6th, 2002, in Jerusalem.

<sup>57</sup> Finkelstein/Silberman (2003), p. 44

<sup>58</sup> Finkelstein/Silberman (2003), p. 45

<sup>59</sup> Finkelstein/Silberman (2003), p. 59

both survived."<sup>60</sup> They don't conceal their admiration of the Biblical glamour which they write: "[...] the saga of Israel, that had first crystallized in the time of Joshi became the world's first fully articulated national and social compact [...]"<sup>61</sup> The utterances put grist on the mills of the ethno-national mythmakers whom Finkelstein and Silberman set out to confront. Maybe, one could guess, they are split between scholarly deconstruction and their pursuit to remain socially, scholarly and political accepted in a predominantly Zionist environment.

It is true that Israel seems to be an exception in the region when it comes to a country's designation. Israel is a state with a name known since antiquity. But this a deception, like also Lewis points out: "Its presence is due not to a survival but to restoration after a political discontinuity of almost two millennia."<sup>62</sup> And after the 2000 years, something completely new and different came to be. There are many debates about to what degree Israel can be called a nation, or even an ethno-nation given its unique and exceptional composition of various ethnic groups with different historical, social, political and even linguistic backgrounds. Many of the recent million immigrants from post-Soviet Russia don't speak Hebrew, the language that was rescued from oblivion by the Zionist movement.<sup>63</sup> The language has been one of the core components in constructing an "ethnic group", and consequently an ethno-nation, out of a group of fellow-believers spread throughout the globe, in contrast to other fellow-believers in this world who don't consider themselves an ethno-nation nor raise the claim of a sovereign nation-state. On the other side, there are Israelis who are non-religious. Consequently, they reject the message of the Bible and thus its ethno-national myths on which the state, in which they are living, is founded. The there are those Orthodox Jews who are evidently religious but reject the state of Israel just because of this reason, and so it goes on.

This heterogeneity is a potential threat to ethno-nation-builders, in this case Zionists. These disintegrating factors are counteracted by the conflict with a common external enemy like the Palestinians and the neighbouring Arab states, and almost daily cultivation of the memory of the holocaust up to its political instrumentalization.<sup>64</sup> But there are also more modern factors which could be cited in favour of Israel as a (very young) nation. One is simply the fact of 50 years of common political and social experience, and of generations who were born on that piece of land and feel that they are Israeli citizens, be they religious or not. In this light, a much more convincing argument for the state of Israel would not be an exclusive, aggressive and backward oriented ethno-nationalism but a secular, civic-democratic, post-Zionist state concept as, for example, the Israeli sociologist Uri Ram suggests.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Finkelstein/Silberman (2003), p. 316.

<sup>61</sup> Finkelstein/Silberman (2003), p. 337.

<sup>62</sup> Lewis (1998), p. 63.

<sup>63</sup> Hebrew ceased to exist as a living language around the time of the so-called Babylonian Captivity in the 5th century B.C., when the Jews switched to Aramaic. The Zionists revived the idiom and made it the official language with the foundation of Israel in 1948. See, among others: Schweizer (1998) p.45.

<sup>64</sup> See also the controversial book on the "Holocaust Industry" by N.G. Finkelstein (2001).

<sup>65</sup> Ram (2001), in: *JHJ*, p.43ff; Ram (1995), especially p. 205ff



the population. It is a difficult task because it undermines the fundaments of ethno-national ideologies, and great parts of the political and cultural establishment have much to lose. The example of the Bible makes this problem particularly obvious. But each step in this direction has two important effects: On the philosophical level, debunking myths is part of the noble process of enlightenment. In more practical terms, the unlinking of (selective or false) historiography from political projects creates more room for much needed social and political alternatives. Thus it may also be a small step towards peace in these shattered regions.

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## Formation and Transformation of the Nation in Israel

Uri Ram\*

Zionism, the Jewish national movement, which in 1948 created the state was formed in Eastern Europe at the end of the 19th-century. Since its emergence more than hundreds of years ago to its contemporary phase at the of the 21st century, Hebrew nationalism experienced several changes and able transformations, though sustained its historical continuity. In this shall conceptualize the various shapes of this nationalist identity and the to it under four headings: pre-nationalism, nationalism, post-nationalism nationalism (or neo-nationalism). The first section outlines the concept we use; in the second section this scheme is applied to the case of the transformation of modern Jewish nationalism; the third section narrates cal-historical background to the emergence of the two contemporary trends: identity: post-Zionism and neo-Zionism; and section four highlights the neo-Zionism and post-Zionism.

### 1. Nationalism and its offspring's: Pre-, Pro-, Post-, Neo-

For the world of the 19th-century, speaking in large generalities, nationalism resented emerging and even revolutionary tendencies, tendencies of modern marching under the lead of the bourgeois class and the state regime. (Gellner (Tilly 1990). By now, in the inception of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century, the relative positivism in social processes has radically altered: today it represents colonial tendencies, tendencies resistant to economic globalization and cultural horizon. Hence, just as in the past, nationalism was associated with processes of trial and statist modernization; today post-nationalism is associated with of post-industrial and post-modern globalization. Alongside the new post-pre-nationalism has resurfaced; old state-nationalism lingers and persists with inertia; and hyper- or neo-nationalism is emerging in association with local chialism, ethnic-communalism, or other politico-cultural objections to globalism and Westernism, which are legitimated by a traditionalist rhetoric.

Thus the "nation" can be thought of as a construct, historically standing between the processes of modernization and globalization. Between these trends the nation has changed roles. It has turned from the dynamic "Gesell: yesterday to the inert "Local" of today.

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