

# **Palestinians, Jebusites, and Evangelicals: The Implications of Palestinian revisionism**

by David Wenkel

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Many Palestinian Arabs, including such prominent figures as the Yasir Arafat and Faisal Husseini, claim that Palestinians descended from the Canaanite tribe of the Jebusites.<sup>1</sup> Such declarations should not surprise. History is political. Many Middle Eastern cultures and states retroactively claim roots to the ancient tribes and empires in order to legitimize their modern nationalism. For instance, Lebanese claim descent from the Phoenicians, Iraqis from the Babylonians, Kurds from the Medians, and Turks from the Hittites.

How significant, then, is the Palestinian-Jebusite link? Connections between modern Palestinians and ancient Jebusites would trump the Jewish claim by predating it, and legitimize the Palestinian claim to Jerusalem and Israel. The political and diplomatic impact is clear, especially as Palestinian leaders insist that Israel forfeit sovereignty over Jerusalem. Less clear are the religious implications not only for Jews but also for the evangelical Christians who believe in the Old Testament promises of God to the nation of Israel.

## **Who Are the Jebusites?**

Historical mention of Jerusalem predates the city's appearance in Jewish history. Ancient texts such as the Egyptian execration texts (2000-1900 B.C.) refer to the city as Rushalimum. The word Jerusalem becomes more recognizable in a series of letters from around 1400 B.C. attributed to scribes acting on behalf of King Abdi-Hepa of Urusalim.<sup>2</sup> The Jebusites inhabited the ancient site of Jerusalem, perhaps as early as 3200 B.C.,<sup>3</sup> but there is reference to Yabusu, an old form of Jebus, on a contract tablet that dates from 2200 B.C.<sup>4</sup>

The first mention of the Jebusites in the Bible occurs as Genesis lists the descendents of Noah. Here, they are counted as direct descendents of a man named Canaan.<sup>5</sup> Then in Exodus, as

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<sup>1</sup> Eric H. Cline, *Jerusalem Besieged: From Ancient Canaan to Modern Israel* (Singapore: University of Michigan Press, 2004), pp. 12, 33.

<sup>2</sup> Jacob Neusner, Alan Avery-Peck, and William Green, "Jerusalem in Judaism," in *Encyclopedia of Judaism* (Boston: Brill, 2000), p. 525.

<sup>3</sup> Herbert Willet, *The Jew through the Centuries* (Chicago: Willett, Clark and Co., 1932), p. 74.

<sup>4</sup> Theophilus G. Pinches, *The Old Testament: In the Light of the Historical Records and Legends of Assyria and Babylonia* (London: SPCK, 1908), p. 324.

<sup>5</sup> Gen. 10:15-6. English Standard Version of the Bible used throughout.

the Jews look to move to the land of Canaan that was promised to their patriarch Abraham, God promises to “drive out” the Jebusites and other tribes from the Promised Land.<sup>6</sup> In Deuteronomy, God orders the Jews to destroy completely “the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations more numerous and mightier than yourselves,” and forbids intermarriage with them.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, while the promise to give the Promised Land to Abraham is unconditional, the pledge to remove the inhabitants such as the Jebusites is conditional upon Israel’s obedience. In the book of Judges, Israel is recorded as disobeying the order to completely annihilate the Jebusites who have committed “abominations” before God,<sup>8</sup> and the book relates how the Jebusites continued to mix with the sons of Benjamin in Jerusalem.<sup>9</sup> Looking at the Bible as a historical guide, this places Jews and Jebusites as coexisting in Israel about the eleventh century B.C. In 966 B.C., King David conquered Jebus, an event not only depicted in the Bible<sup>10</sup> but also confirmed independently by modern historians.<sup>11</sup> There is no mention of Jebusites’ total annihilation.

The Christian narrative continues into the New Testament, initially treating the Jebusites under the more general rubric of the Canaanites. In Matthew 15:22, a Canaanite woman approaches Jesus because her daughter is possessed by a demon. Craig Blomberg, professor of New Testament at Denver Seminary, argues that Matthew picked the word “Canaanite” in order to conjure up images of past Canaanite evils.<sup>12</sup> Jesus initially tells the woman that to assist her would be equivalent to helping a despised dog, but he eventually relents.<sup>13</sup> The incident suggests a new disposition toward the Canaanites, including by extension the Jebusites. Non-Biblical ancient sources also discuss the Jebusites though often these merely amplify Biblical accounts. The Hellenized Jewish historian Philo (20 B.C. to 40 A.D.), for example, referred to the Jebusites as a nation of “wickedness.”<sup>14</sup> The Jewish historian Josephus (c. 37-c. 100 A.D.) also relies upon the Old Testament to discuss the Jebusites in the context of his account of David’s conquest of Jerusalem.<sup>15</sup>

It is because the Old Testament and ancient historians amplified such a clear record of the conquest of Jebus that the claim to Jebusite heritage has any significance at all. Claiming Jebusite descent is more significant than claiming linkage to other Canaanite groups such as the Amorites

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<sup>6</sup> Ex. 33:2.

<sup>7</sup> Deut. 7:1-3.

<sup>8</sup> Ezr. 9:1.

<sup>9</sup> Judges 1:21

<sup>10</sup> 1 Chron. 11:4-5; 2 Sam. 24:18.

<sup>11</sup> Harry M. Orlinsky, *Ancient Israel* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1954), p. 71.

<sup>12</sup> Craig Blomberg, *Matthew* (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), p. 242.

<sup>13</sup> Matt. 15:28.

<sup>14</sup> Philo of Alexandria, “Questions and Answers on Genesis,” in *The Works of Philo*, trans. C. D. Yonge (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1993), p. 874.

<sup>15</sup> Josephus, *The Works of Josephus: New Updated Edition*, trans. William Whiston (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1987), pp. 7.60-9.

and the Girgashites. Those asserting Jebusite heritage essentially argue that Jerusalem is rightfully theirs because Israel's own scriptures say that Jebusite possession predated the Jewish claim.

## A Myth Created

The claim to Jebusite heritage within the Palestinian community is a recent construct. For many Muslims, Jerusalem became important as a result of the Prophet Muhammad's night journey. Ghada Hashem Talhami, a former editor of *Arab Studies Quarterly* and, at present, a professor of politics at Lake Forest College in Lake Forest, Illinois, explains, "The story of Muslim regard for Jerusalem begins with the Prophet Muhammad's nocturnal journey, as it is referred to in the Qur'an, and ascension to heaven."<sup>16</sup> Even then, the Qur'an mentions neither the Jebusites nor, for that matter, the city of Jerusalem.<sup>17</sup>

Beyond religious claims, Talhami identifies three historical factors underlying the development of Jerusalem as a sacred Muslim city: first, the establishment of *awqaf* (charitable endowments) in the city; second, the development of a literary trend depicting the history of cities; and, third, the development of Jerusalem as a pilgrimage site in the eleventh century based on such writings. Modern writers such as Abu Muhammad Asim have built upon this literature to claim that Jerusalem would be the future site of the gathering of the pious on Judgment Day.<sup>18</sup>

Palestinian activists, however, argue that their claim to Jerusalem predates the Muslim conquest. Andrew S. Buchanan, then a doctoral candidate in international relations from St. Andrews University, Scotland, framed this claim to "uninterrupted continuity" with Jebusites and Canaanites as "perceptions which are ideologically motivated, history viewed emotionally, distortion becoming reality."<sup>19</sup>

The Palestinian-Jebusite linkage first appeared in the Arabic literature. Rashid Khalidi,<sup>20</sup> a Palestinian activist and historian, wrote that in the mid- or late 1960s, Palestinian nationalism developed a historiography that "anachronistically read back into the history of Palestine over the past few centuries, and even millennia, a nationalist consciousness and identity that are in fact relatively modern."<sup>21</sup> In an accompanying footnote, he wrote that this historical "outlook" created

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<sup>16</sup> Ghada Talhami, "The Modern History of Islamic Academic Myths and Propaganda," *Middle East Policy*, 7 (2000): 114.

<sup>17</sup> Daniel Pipes, "[The Muslim Claim to Jerusalem](#)," *Middle East Quarterly*, Fall 2001, pp. 49-66.

<sup>18</sup> Talhami, "Islamic Academic Myths and Propaganda," pp. 119-20.

<sup>19</sup> Andrew S. Buchanan, *Peace with Justice: A History of the Israeli-Palestinian Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangement* (Basingstoke, U.K.: Macmillan, 2000), p. xiii.

<sup>20</sup> Other scholars have accused Khalidi of plagiarism for lifting material without attribution: Shira Schoenberg, "Dershowitz Levels Plagiarism Charges at Arab Studies Professor," [Jewish Advocate](#), June 24, 2005; Elizabeth O'Neill "[The Complaint against Rashid Khalidi](#)," History News Network, June 17, 2005.

<sup>21</sup> Rashid Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 149.

a “predilection for seeing in peoples such as the Canaanites, Jebusites, Amorites, and Philistines the lineal ancestors of the modern Palestinians.”<sup>22</sup>

This was apparent in the 1978 *Al-Mawsu'at Al-Filastinniya (Palestinian Encyclopedia)*, which declared, “The Palestinians [to be] the descendants of the Jebusites, who are of Arab origin,” and described Jerusalem as “an Arab city because its first builders were the Canaanite Jebusites, whose descendants are the Palestinians.”<sup>23</sup> The entry continued, “Ever since the destruction of the Temple, the link with Jews and Christians has been severed. Muslims alone have a right to the Temple.”<sup>24</sup>

In 1989, Sami Hadawi, a Palestine Liberation Organization representative, wrote in his history of Palestine that the Palestinians’ historical connection was not to the “Islamic desert conquerors of 1,300 years ago” but rather to “the original native population.”<sup>25</sup> The Palestinians, he argued, “were there when the early Hebrews invaded the land in about 1500 B.C.”<sup>26</sup>

According to David Bar-Illan, former government spokesman under Benjamin Netanyahu, unchecked historical revisionism within the academy enabled such myths to make the leap to Western literature. Webster’s 1992 *New World Encyclopedia*, for example, has “accepted without question the myth that ‘The Palestinian people are descendants of the people of Canaan.’”<sup>27</sup>

A politicized professorate enabled the myth to sink roots. By 2001, what Khalidi once attributed to anachronistic revisionism, he came to promote when he attached his name to an article published by the American Committee for Jerusalem which declared, without corroborating evidence, that “a number of historians and scholars, many of the Arabs of Jerusalem today, indeed the majority of Palestinian Arabs, are descendants of the ancient Jebusites and Canaanites.” Khalidi now argued that Palestinians did not descend from those who arrived with Muhammad’s armies, but rather, “native Palestinians, both Christian and Muslim Arabs, are of a mixed race whose connection with the land reaches back into very early history.”<sup>28</sup>

The Palestinian Authority replicated the myth in its textbooks. The Center for Monitoring the Impact of Peace published several reports that surveyed Palestinian school textbooks between 2000 and 2002.<sup>29</sup> A second grade text book taught that the “Canaanite Arabs were the first ones

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 253, fn. 13.

<sup>23</sup> As’ad Abdul Rahman, ed., *Al-Mawsu'at Al-Filastinniya*, vol. 2 (Beirut: The Palestinian Encyclopedia Foundation, 1978), p. 667.

<sup>24</sup> David Bar-Illan, “Next Year in (a Divided?) Jerusalem,” *Commentary*, Sept. 1994, p. 35.

<sup>25</sup> Sami Hadawi, *Bitter Harvest: A Modern History of Palestine* (Buckhurst Hill, U.K.: Scorpion, 1989), p. 30.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Bar-Illan, “Next Year in (a Divided?) Jerusalem,” p. 35.

<sup>28</sup> Rashid Khalidi, et al., “Jerusalem: A Concise History,” American Committee on Jerusalem (ACJ) website, 2001. In response to the plagiarism charge, the ACJ removed the link.

<sup>29</sup> Arnon Groiss and Yohanan Manor, eds., “[Jews, Israel, and Peace in Palestinian School Textbooks](#),” Center for Monitoring the Impact of Peace (CMIP), Mevaseret-Zion, Israel, Nov. 2001; [Jews, Israel and Peace in the Palestinian Authority Textbooks and High School Examinations](#), CMIP, 2002, accessed Dec. 18, 2006; “Jews, Israel and Peace in Palestinian Textbooks, The New Textbooks for Grades 3 and 8,” CMIP, May 2003.

who settled in Palestine”;<sup>30</sup> a seventh grade text read, “Since the dawn of history the soil of Palestine has raised its Arab identity high through the giants of Canaan.”<sup>31</sup> The Palestinian curriculum also taught that Nablus was “one of the cities of the early Arab Canaanites,”<sup>32</sup> that “Canaanite Palestinians ... invented the alphabet,”<sup>33</sup> and that “the Arab Jebusites built it [Jerusalem] five thousand years ago in that distinguished place, and it has remained since that time a capital of Palestine during the ages.”<sup>34</sup>

There is no archaeological evidence to support the claim of Jebusite-Arab-Palestinian continuity. Eric Cline, an associate professor of Semitic languages and literatures at George Washington University, cites general consensus among historians and archeologists that modern Palestinians are “more closely related to the Arabs of Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Jordan, and other countries”<sup>35</sup> than the Jebusites of the ancient world. Assimilation, annihilation, and acculturation undercut any significant connection between Jebusites and modern Palestinians.<sup>36</sup>

The late Johns Hopkins University archaeologist William F. Albright also questioned “the surprising tenacity” of “the myth of the unchanging East.”<sup>37</sup> He rejected outright any continuity between the “folk beliefs and practices of the modern peasants and nomads” and “pre-Arab times.”<sup>38</sup> Yehoshua Ben-Arieh, professor emeritus of geography at Hebrew University, argued that Arab scholars’ insistence that Palestinians are “direct descendents” of Canaanites is driven by a “political objective” broader than the claim to Jerusalem itself and meant to cement a claim to ownership and primacy not only in historical Palestine but also in the broader Middle East.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *National Education*, Grade 2, pt. 1 (2001), p. 4, as cited in Groiss and Manor, eds., “[Jews, Israel, and Peace in Palestinian School Textbooks](#),” p. 28.

<sup>31</sup> *Our Beautiful Language*, Grade 7, pt. 1, p. 32, as cited in Groiss and Manor, eds., “[Jews, Israel and Peace in Palestinian School Textbooks](#),” p. 28.

<sup>32</sup> *National Education*, Grade 7, p. 71, as cited in Groiss and Manor, eds., “[Jews, Israel and Peace in Palestinian School Textbooks](#),” p. 28.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8, as cited in Groiss and Manor, eds., “[Jews, Israel and Peace in Palestinian School Textbooks](#),” p. 28.

<sup>34</sup> *Geography of Palestine*, Grade 7, p. 77, as cited in Groiss and Manor, eds., “[Jews, Israel and Peace in Palestinian School Textbooks](#),” p. 28.

<sup>35</sup> Cline, *Jerusalem Besieged*, p. 33.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 34-5.

<sup>37</sup> William F. Albright, *History, Archeology, and Christian Humanism* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), p. 157.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

<sup>39</sup> Yehoshua Ben-Arieh, “Holy Land Views in Nineteenth-century Western Travel Literature,” in Yehoshua Ben-Arieh and Moshe Davis, eds., *Western Societies and the Holy Land* (Westport: Praeger, 1991), p. 24.

### The Significance of the Jebusite Claim

Still, accurate or not, in the Middle East perception is more important than reality. Claims of Palestinian-Jebusite linkage have particular impact upon the Palestinian Christian community because they find it difficult to separate their Christian heritage from their ethnic heritage. While most Palestinian Christians are Eastern Orthodox and not evangelical in the U.S. sense, Genesis 12:3, which describes God's covenant to Abraham—"I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse,"<sup>40</sup>—remains relevant. The Old Testament identifies the Jebusites as the enemies of God to be annihilated. While the New Testament suggests that love toward enemies should supplant old animosities, Christians view both Israel and the Jebusites through a theological and political lens incorporating both the Old and New Testaments.<sup>41</sup>

Salim J. Munayer, director of Musalaha, a Christian reconciliation ministry for Palestinians and Israelis, states that "[a]mong Palestinian evangelicals there is no consensus about the origin of Palestinians from the Jebusites or the Canaanites."<sup>42</sup> Jack Kincaid, in his attempt to write the "untold story of Palestinian Christians," circumvents the issue by claiming that "some observers" view the land, although once occupied by Jebusites and others, as a land given by God in Genesis 17:8 to "Abraham and his descendents."<sup>43</sup> This position uses divine revelation to disregard any claim to previous Jebusite ownership of Israeli or Palestinian land.

The Palestinian claim to Jebusite heritage may be even a bigger issue for evangelical Christians outside of the Middle East. Moshe Aumann, former consul-general and counselor for church relations at the Israeli Embassy in Washington, writes that for evangelicals "the return of the Jewish people to its ancestral homeland is the necessary forerunner of the return of Jesus—and is to be celebrated for that if no other reason."<sup>44</sup> Any argument that dismisses the Jewish claim to Jerusalem, especially a claim such as the Jebusite-Palestinian linkage that is so devoid of evidence, would from an evangelical perspective hinder the return of the messiah. While not evangelical in the contemporary sense, it was a similar understanding that contributed to British political outreach to Jews in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>45</sup>

How will evangelical reaction to Palestinian claims manifest itself? The evangelical Christian community is not monolithic. Many evangelical Christians may be ambivalent. Their dispassion often reflects lack of Western news coverage about the Palestinian claims, especially after Arafat's death. Some ambivalence may also be rooted in their trust that professional

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<sup>40</sup> Also, reinforced in Gen. 27:29.

<sup>41</sup> Moshe Aumann, *Conflict & Connection: The Jewish-Christian-Israel Triangle* (New York: Gefen, 2003), p. 51.

<sup>42</sup> Salim J. Munayer, e-mail correspondence with author, Sept. 29, 2006.

<sup>43</sup> Jack Kincaid, *Between Two Fires: The Untold Story of the Palestinian Christians* (Gainesville: Banner Communications, 2002), p. 15.

<sup>44</sup> Aumann, *Conflict & Connection*, p. 53.

<sup>45</sup> Donald Wagner, "Short Fuse to Apocalypse? Some in the Religious Right Call Middle East Peace Efforts 'Satanic Heresy.' A Look at the Political Roots of Christian Zionism—and Why It Puts the World at Risk," *Sojourners*, 32 (2003): 20.

archaeologists will continue to disavow such claims. Other evangelicals note that the biblical depiction of Armageddon mentions neither Jebusites nor Canaanites.<sup>46</sup> Rather, the Book of Revelation describes the enemies at the end of time as “the kings of the earth with their armies.”<sup>47</sup>

Still other evangelical Christians may see Palestinian claims of Jebusite heritage as reason to dismiss any righteousness to Palestinian national claims. God had ordered the Jebusites annihilated because of their sins. While Palestinians say that Jewish immigrants improperly displaced Palestinians, evangelicals may interpret Palestinian claims of Jebusite heritage as reason to further support Israel.

The last potential evangelical reaction to Palestinian claims of Jebusite heritage relates to Jerusalem. Many evangelicals are split over the importance of Jerusalem. In a dialogue in the Gospel of John, a woman says, “Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship,” and Jesus responds by saying, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father.”<sup>48</sup> Still some evangelicals do ascribe special meaning to Jerusalem.<sup>49</sup> But most recognize that this is not Jerusalem as it exists now in Israel but rather a “heavenly” or “new” Jerusalem that will come from heaven, not earth.<sup>50</sup> Still, the historical importance of Jerusalem to both the Jewish and Christian narrative is difficult to dispute. In the evangelical perspective, King David conquered the city of Jebus because God was administering justice on those who had sinned against him. The desire to make Jerusalem into Jebus again may bring the re-assertion that Israel has exclusive rights to Jerusalem because it is understood that the city was given to that nation by God.

## Conclusion

Why focus on the evangelical interpretation of a Palestinian-Jebusite linkage? Outside evangelical circles, the impact of such linkage may be minimal. Those sympathetic to Palestinian nationalism will remain proponents of a Palestinian state, and those not sympathetic to Palestinian nationalism will not be swayed, especially in the absence of archaeological or scientific evidence. Most Americans will view the claim to Jebusite heritage as just a foolish public relations strategy. To many, the question of kingdoms from centuries, let alone millennia, ago is irrelevant. Evangelical Christian attitudes matter, though, especially as, at present, they are among the strongest backers of Israel in the world.

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<sup>46</sup> Rev. 19:19.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> John 4: 21.

<sup>49</sup> Colin Chapman, *Whose Holy City? Jerusalem and the Future of Peace in the Middle East* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), p. 115-6.

<sup>50</sup> Heb. 12:22; Rev. 3:12, 21:2, 21:10.