# The Myths of Zionism

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# Contents

# Introduction

The idea for this book first took root in the summer of 2002 following brazenly racist remarks by the former Israeli Labour prime minister, Ehud Barak, when he claimed that 'lying' was an intrinsic part of Arab culture (Aruri 2003: 173). This extraordinary outburst reflected very badly on Barak – perhaps suggesting something akin to the psychological process called 'projection'. Was he not projecting onto his foe a revelation about his own political ideas and beliefs buried deep in his mind-set? Certainly, the Palestinians experience Zionism as an edifice of lies.

Take a simple example. When Barak was prime minister, the number of illegal Jewish settlements on the West Bank increased, despite his supposed commitment to the 'peace process'. Zionist politicians like Barak cloak their claims to the West Bank in religious myth, invoking biblical tales about the ancient 'land of Israel'. For Palestinians, however, whose families have lived on and farmed the land of Palestine for generations, this myth is seen as a huge lie, justifying the stealing of their land.

What distinguishes a lie from a myth? According to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* a lie is 'an intentionally false statement', a 'deliberate deception', whereas a myth is a 'widely held but false notion', without necessarily deceptive intent. But if a group of people experience injustice and oppression as a result of a myth, a falsehood, surely it hardly matters to them whether the falsehood was, or was not, deliberately deceptive in its origin.

The argument in this book is that Zionism is held together by a series of myths. A package of false notions which undermine its claims on the Jewish religion and Jewish history, its rationale as a response to Europe's anti-Semitism, and above all its justification for its aggressive and very dangerous political posturing in the land of Palestine.

The chapters that follow deal directly with the myths by responding either to specific claims made by Zionist ideologues or to widely held beliefs that have become part of Zionist folklore.

Zionism's greatest myth-maker, David Ben-Gurion, inadvertently helped shape the book's first and last chapters. This fixer of facts was Israel's first prime minister and Zionism's most successful leader in the twentieth century. Ben-Gurion once boasted that a myth can become a fact if people believe in it strongly enough. He deftly used this intellectual sleight-of-hand to manipulate the Bible stories to make them fit Zionism's political claims on Palestinian land.

Chapter 1 challenges Ben-Gurion's most outrageous use of religious myth, namely that the Bible gave him a 'mandate' to declare a Jewish state in Palestine. The chapter goes on to illustrate how Israeli archaeology is now undermining Zionism's claims about 'ancient Israel'.

Chapter 10 shows how Ben-Gurion destroyed any prospects of Arab–Jewish reconciliation. He sabotaged secret talks with Egypt's President Nasser, arguably the single most important Arab national leader in the twentieth century, who was seeking an honourable peace with Israel. The 'Free [Army] Officers', including Nasser, who led Egypt's national revolution in 1952, had gone to considerable lengths to build bridges to the country's Jewish community.

Ben-Gurion's behaviour here points to the book's most important conclusion that Zionism is the source of Arab–Jewish enmity. Any prospects of Arab–Jewish reconciliation depend upon its removal.

The idea of 'Arab–Jewish reconciliation' begs a vital question about an ignored earlier history. The Islamic revolution, over 1,300 years ago, heralded what several scholars have called a *symbiosis* between Arabs and Jews producing not merely a Jewish culture in Arabic, but a *Judaeo-Arabic* or even a *Judaeo-Islamic culture* (Chapters 4 and 10).

It is even possible that the highly mobile Jewish merchant class, which came to lead Jewish communities in medieval Europe and helped secure periods of prosperity and stability for Jews in the early history of Europe (Chapter 3) has its roots, at least in part, in this early Islamic Jewish period. This was certainly the view of the twentieth century's most distinguished scholar of Arab Jewish history, Professor S.D. Goitein (Chapters 4 and 10).

But what has this to do with destroying Zionist myths? There are two very different answers. First, Zionism ignores the Islamic Arab component to Jewish history; second, Zionism sees only Jewish 'suffering' during the so-called 'Exile', especially in Europe.

'Exile' is a particularly ludicrous myth that Zionism politicised as it imported it from the Bible stories. It refers to nearly 2,000 years of

Jewish history from the overthrow of the Temple at Jerusalem by the Roman army in 70 CE until the birth of Israel in 1948. Jews living outside Palestine during this period are considered to be living in 'Exile'. Now Arab–Jewish symbiosis hardly sounds like 'Exile'. In fact, Jews had been settled in Mesopotamia (a great chunk of which Britain turned into Iraq in the early twentieth century), and especially in the region around the ancient city of Babylon, centuries before the so-called 'Exile'. To this day, Iranian and Iraqi Jews speak proudly of an uninterrupted 2,500-year history. The Babylonian Talmud, which has remained the spiritual guide for all religious Jews, not least European Jews, is itself a testimony to the significance of these Jewish communities. After the Islamic revolution, Baghdad displaced Babylon as the Jewish spiritual centre for all Jewish communities, including, at that time, the much smaller European Jewish communities.

Chapters 2 and 3 challenge the 'Exile' and 'suffering' myths. In Chapter 2 we see how at the time of the fall of the Temple at Jerusalem, nearly 2,000 years ago, most Jews were living outside Palestine, scattered throughout the Roman Empire and beyond, not least in Babylon.

Chapter 3 counterposes the emergence of the Jewish merchant class in medieval Europe to the 'suffering' myth. Now there is no doubt that the Jews' economic role in medieval Europe could exacerbate as well as stimulate traditional Christian anti-Semitism. But Zionism tells only one side of the story. Christian rulers were often ready to protect their sometimes very successful, economically active Jewish subjects. In any case, Zionism steers clear of any serious discussion, let alone analysis, of the Jewish economic role in early European history.

This is sheer hypocrisy. Zionism had to confront the anachronistic image of the 'Jewish trader and financier' that survived the European Enlightenment in just the same way as did the other far more important modern Jewish movements that emerged out of the Enlightenment, the assimilationists and the socialists (Chapter 6). Shakespeare's controversial Jewish character, Shylock, has his roots in this early European Jewish history. You cannot ignore Shylock; you have to explain him. Chapter 3 attempts just such an explanation.

The Enlightenment had held out the promise of assimilation. It was a declaration of new citizen's rights and freedoms in Europe and America, for Jews alongside Christians. This included liberation from the narrow economic role that pre-modern Christian Europe

had attempted to impose on the Jews. The American and French Revolutions of 1776 and 1789 began to turn the promise into practical political reality. Alas, the revolutions in the Russian Empire, where the majority of Jews lived, and which climaxed in the early twentieth century, failed that promise. Chapter 6 explores the historical background and argues that here lie the real roots of Zionism.

Chapters 5, 7 and 9 explore the deeply destructive impact of Zionism on the Arabs and their land in Palestine as it too emerged into the modern world. Chapter 5 debunks the first half of the famous double-barrelled Zionist myth, 'a land without people, for a people without land' and Chapter 6 debunks the second half. Chapter 5 tries to bring alive the thriving Arab peasant farming communities in the 'empty land' of Palestine before the Zionists arrived in the nineteenth century. In so far as the chapter succeeds, all credit must go to the brilliant, but far too little known Palestinian historian, Beshara Doumani, whose research this chapter has shamelessly plagiarised.

Chapters 7 and 9 expose the myth that Zionism's claims for Jewish national independence and liberation can be compared to the struggles of oppressed peoples in other parts of the world in the twentieth century. In fact, Zionism represented a movement in the opposite direction. After the First World War, it helped consolidate British colonial rule over the Arab world. After the Second World War, the newly created Jewish State would become nothing less than a *strategic asset* for US neo-imperialist designs for the region. In both cases Zionism has been completely dependent on the Western imperial powers.

These chapters throw some surprising light on familiar arguments. For example, Chapter 7 shows how the 1917 Balfour Declaration, which paved the way for the Jewish State, has a far seedier and more unpleasant pedigree than most people realise. Arthur Balfour, the British Conservative minister, whose name graces the Declaration, was driven in part by a quite unacceptable anti-Semitism. Not only did his anti-Semitism infect the rest of David Lloyd George's War Cabinet, Zionist leaders such as Chaim Weizmann happily acquiesced in it.

This exposes a deeply disturbing, and usually hidden, side of Zionism, which we also encounter in Chapter 6 with Theodor Herzl, Zionism's founder. This was a willingness to incorporate European anti-Semitism's views about Jews. To put it bluntly, Zionist leaders

were too ready to say to reactionary European politicians, 'Too many Jews in your country? Help us dump them in Palestine.'

Chapter 7 also discusses an extraordinary claim that the main motive behind the Balfour Declaration was a belief by the British War Cabinet that 'Jewish power' in America and Russia would help consolidate the allies' position in the war with Germany.

Noam Chomsky is the main inspiration behind Chapter 9. As Palestine's greatest intellectual, Edward Said, observed, Chomsky's *Fateful Triangle* 'may be the most ambitious book ever attempted on the conflict between Zionism and the Palestinians viewed as centrally involving the United States … [It] can be read as a protracted war between fact and a series of myths – Israeli democracy, Israeli purity of arms, the benign occupation, no racism against Arabs in Israel …' This is an impossible act to follow, and if this chapter does nothing more than persuade people to read Chomsky, then it will have served its purpose.

However, the chapter does attempt a little originality. Under President George W. Bush the relation between the United States and Israel sometimes looked strangely reversed. Far from Israel serving US interests in the Middle East, did the US not begin to serve Israeli interests? American Jewish neo-conservatives, at the heart of the Bush Administration, are thought to have engineered this reversal of policy. Certainly some of these neo-conservatives had roots in Israel's fanatical Likud Party (the governing party at the time of writing in the summer of 2003). A complicating factor is that this nasty clique has given a new lease of life to an old anti-Semitic accusation of Zionist conspiracy. Chapter 9 attempts carefully to dissect the accusation, and considers to what extent the will of the Bush Administration was bent by the neo-conservatives.

Chapter 8 challenges the myth that the Nazi Holocaust of the Jews provides an unanswerable case in defence of Zionism. Whilst there is no doubt that the Holocaust constitutes one of the gravest crimes in human history, it cannot justify the creation of a Jewish State based upon the violent exclusion of another people from their land, which is exactly what occurred in 1948. This was a defining moment for both Zionism and the Palestinians, who remember it as *Naqba*, the Catastrophe. Far from this being a legitimate response to the Holocaust, the Holocaust properly remembered itself taints the actions, morally debasing those who use it in this way. Using writings and analyses about the Holocaust, Chapter 8 explores several ways that Zionist political action might be considered to have been

thus corrupted. It argues that a blind ideological refusal to under-stand the political realities of the Palestinian people has itself a dan-gerous capacity to radicalise Zionism, tempting it to ever greater acts of violence against the Palestinian people.

And we know from its short and bloody history how that violence can turn genocidal. We have shocking historical markers from the former Palestinian village of Deir Yassin in 1948 and at the Sabra and Shatila Palestinian refugee camps in Beirut in 1982. One radical Israeli writer has coined a new term for this process: *politicide*, meaning 'to bring about the dissolution of the Palestinian people's existence' (Kimmerling 2003: 3), symbolised by the policies of the Israeli leader Ariel Sharon.

The Jewish State has an innate inability to recognise its responsi-bility for the *Naqba*. In truth, the shadow of the Palestinian refugee was destined to haunt it forever, physically, politically, morally, psy-chologically and ultimately militarily. The armed Palestinian guer-rilla movement, led by Yasser Arafat and the Palestinian Liberation Organisation, had its roots deep in the refugee camps spread throughout much of the Arab world. Though it took 20 years to emerge, the PLO was the Jewish State's negative *alter ego*. It had a moral and political right to recognition on equal terms and to recognition of its equal claim on all of the land of Palestine. The suicide bomber at the beginning of the twenty-first century repre-sents the failure of the Jewish State to understand this. The suicide bomber is sometimes literally the refugee who has not been allowed to come home.

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Throughout this book I use the formulation anti-Semitism to describe hatred of the Jews. I am well aware that there is a debate about this concept (even how to spell it), but it is rather pedantic and I don't think it need concern us here.

If this book suggests the urgent need for an alternative Jewish history, both ancient and modern, to the one the Zionists thrust upon us in the twentieth century, then this is a bonus. But I make no claims to have written such a history. My main concern has been only to demolish Zionism's mythical history.

# 1
## 'The Bible is our Mandate'

When David Ben-Gurion warned the British authorities, via Lord Peel and the Royal Commission[1] in 1936, that 'the Bible is our Mandate' (Ben-Gurion 1970: 107), the twentieth century's most famous Zionist politician, who would become Israel's first prime minister, was giving modern expression to an absolutely funda-mental biblical myth, which lies at the core of Zionism. According to this Old Testament story, an ancient Jewish kingdom of Israel, usually referred to as 'Ancient Israel', and sometimes called the United Monarchy of David and Solomon, is said to have existed from about 1000 to 922 BCE. The United Monarchy was allegedly the most powerful and prosperous state in the eastern Mediterranean at this time, exercising sovereignty from the Euphrates in Syria to the brook of Egypt (Wadi el-Arish) in northern Sinai.

These borders coincide with those of the promise God is said to have made to the Patriarch Abraham and recorded in Genesis, the opening chapter of the Bible.

> The Lord made a covenant with Abraham, saying, 'And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.' (Genesis 17.8)

This is the basis for the notorious visionary geographical concept of Zionism, *Eretz Israel*, the land of Israel, the bedrock of Zionist ideology, a potent mixture of ancient Judaism and modern nation-alism, which hails the promise to Abraham and claims the United Monarchy as its political expression and modern legitimating model for itself.

It is at this point that the reader needs to be alerted to a rather startling characteristic about Ben-Gurion, something he shared with many other Zionist leaders. Ben-Gurion did not particularly believe in this Bible story, or for that matter any other. What mattered,

according to him, was that many Jews *did* believe it. That was enough. It did not matter whether the belief was true or not. Making sense of this strange belief system, symptomatic in general of the peculiarities inherent in Zionist ideology, will form the basis of the first half of this chapter. We will then consider something even more surprising: Zionists are great archaeologists. It is a national obsession and for over 100 years they have been excavating in Palestine in search of 'Ancient Israel'. On many occasions, false and over-excited announcements of its discovery have been proclaimed, only to collapse in the face of intense scientific scrutiny. Then, in the 1990s, the realisation began to dawn that it just might not be there ...

Some of Israel's more far-sighted archaeologists then realised that what scientists sometimes call a 'paradigm shift' was necessary. In other words, the taken-for-granted framework for understanding how to make sense of archaeological discovery was itself the problem. To put it bluntly, the Old Testament stories, far from providing guidelines for archaeological discovery, were proving to be obstacles.

The chapter concludes by looking at how archaeologists are coming to terms with what amounts to an intellectual revolution in thinking about ancient Palestine, and how they have found themselves inadvertently challenging the Zionist myth at the core of modern Israeli identity.

## BEN-GURION: ZIONIST PIONEER ...

David Ben-Gurion, born in Plonsk, in Poland, in 1886, was part of a generation of young Jews in the Tsarist Russian Empire shocked by the scale and excesses of the pogroms, the anti-Semitic riots and murderous attacks on Jewish communities. (This period, including the young Ben-Gurion's political activism in Poland, is explored in detail in Chapter 6.) Some of these young Jews became Zionists and a few, including Ben-Gurion, went to live in Palestine. There were already a few established Zionist agricultural settlements in Palestine, which at that time was part of the Ottoman Empire (discussed in Chapter 5). On arrival in Palestine in 1906 Ben-Gurion went in search of the agricultural settlements which he was already describing as 'Hebrew republics' (Teveth 1987: 40). At the time there were about 55,000 Jews in Palestine out of a total of 700,000 inhabitants. Only a small minority of the Jews were working on the

settlements. Ben-Gurion was soon to discover that, although these settlements were built on land which had been purchased from absentee Arab landlords, an understandably resentful peasantry which had been subsequently evicted often returned to make armed incursions. As early as 1909 we find Ben-Gurion, gun in hand, ready to defend an agricultural settlement in the Galilee (Teveth 1987: 64).

Ben-Gurion made his mark on Zionist politics in Palestine almost immediately. He was at the founding conference of the Poale Zion (the Palestine Social Democratic Hebrew Workers Party; its politics are discussed in Chapter 6), and in 1906 and he was elected to its central committee (Teveth 1987: 45). Poale Zion would go on to become *the* decisive force in Zionist politics for most of the twentieth century, and Ben-Gurion was to become its most charismatic and successful leader.

### … AND MYTH-MAKER

In this chapter we are concerned with trying to understand Ben-Gurion's belief system. It provides an unparalleled insight into Zionist myth-making. Ben-Gurion explains it himself very well:

> It is not important whether the story is a true record of an event or not. What is of importance is that this is what the Jews believed as far back as the period of the First Temple. (Pearlman 1965: 227)

A writer called Yizhar, who much later became part of Ben-Gurion's inner circle, has recently tried to defend the Zionist leader from the accusation that, by mixing fact with belief-in-a-fact, he was deliberately manipulating the truth in favour of consciously shaping myths to suit the political expediency of the Zionist enterprise. In short, Yizhar tries to square the circle between myth and truth:

> Myth is no less a truth than history, but it is an additional truth, a different truth, a truth that resides alongside the truth; a non objective human truth, but a truth that makes its way to the historical truth. (Wistrich and Ohana 1995: 61)

This appears to be clever, perhaps even profound, writing, but it is deeply flawed. It is true that by persuading people to act, and if necessary to act violently, in response to myth, historical fact can be created. But this does not validate the myth by somehow injecting

truth into it after the event. This, however, was Ben-Gurion's game. Intense belief in the myth made it a truth, or at least as good as a truth. This is demagogy and, in the early 1960s, it led to Ben-Gurion falling out with some of Israel's most prominent secular and religious intellectuals. The catalyst was the so-called Lavon Affair.

What concerns us here is not the Lavon Affair itself,[2] but the unexpected way it not only put Ben-Gurion's integrity in question but also exposed the fragility of the ideological character of the Israeli State. The scandal rocked Israel

> with tempestuous discord that sapped the young state's foundations, exposed Ben Gurion and Lavon to private and public travail … and reduced the political arena to utter chaos. (Gilbert 1998: 296–7)[3]

Ben-Gurion then faced a long showdown with many of Israel's more liberal intellectuals.

## BEN-GURION AND THE MESSIAH

One of Ben-Gurion's most sensational uses of myth-making, one that would eventually so antagonise his critics, was his play on the messianic theme. At first sight this may seem preposterous. After all, Ben-Gurion denied the centrality of religion as an integrating force in modern Jewish nationalism (Keren 1983: 65) and was a great believer in science and rationality. However, with Ben-Gurion, nothing was that straightforward.

He has been described as a 'crude monist', rather than an atheist.[4] This seems to mean that he believed in the enhanced spiritual powers of the human mind, 'The belief in the ability of the human mind stems from its identification with the universe it explores' (Keren 1983: 28), and allowed him a backdoor re-entry to religion when it suited him as well as the flexibility to reinterpret religion to fit in with modern political needs and their ideological justification.

In any event, his 'monism' allowed him his own 'messianic' aspirations, apparently available to human genius, with which he seems to have believed he was endowed. 'God or Nature', he wrote, 'endows the genius with sublime talents, not out of love for him, but from a desire to bestow upon the world sublime creations … He brings into existence an intermediary …' (Teveth 1987: 10). He saw himself as this intermediary and often employed the term 'Hazon Meshihi', 'Messianic Vision' (Wistrich and Ohana 1995: 62) in

relation to the modern Jewish national movement in Palestine. He argued that there were three components to modern Jewish nationalism: the people's link to the homeland, the Hebrew language and, above all, the messianic link to redemption (Keren 1983: 65).

What was the meaning of Ben-Gurion's 'messianic vision' and its link to redemption? According to both Judaism and Christianity, God will send His representative, an intermediary, the Messiah, to earth in order to transform human society and redeem it of its sins. Redemption means 'renewal' or rebirth and is rooted in a vision of Holy Goodness for all humanity. In Judaism the Messiah has yet to arrive; in Christianity, Jesus Christ, the 'Son of God', was the Messiah and 'He' will return.

One of Ben-Gurion's harshest critics, the writer Avraham Avi-hai, has argued that Ben-Gurion stripped the concept of Messiah of its personification, a concept common to Judaism and Christianity. Ben-Gurion instead substitutes Zionism as a Messianic movement for the Messiah-as-Person. Hence the redemption of mankind is to be preceded by the redemption of the Jewish people, restored to their own land (Keren 1983: 65).

Ben-Gurion talked about the establishment of a model society which will become 'a light unto nations' (lifting the theme from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah), 'Through it will come universal redemption, the reign of righteousness and human brotherhood and the elimination of wickedness' (Keren 1983: 65). Ben-Gurion's statement here reads as though he is actually quoting Isaiah, but in fact what he is doing is using biblical language himself to justify the creation of the state of Israel, a device commonly employed by Zionists who describe themselves as non-believers.

Ben-Gurion often interlaced remarks like this with references to the Jews performing the noble task of settling the 'ancient home-land' as a necessary condition of universal redemption for all on account of the fact that they were, or at least could become, the 'chosen people' (according to the Bible, the Jews are God's 'chosen people'). One cannot but admire the sheer gall of the man. Ben-Gurion had usurped Christianity as well as Judaism. The Jewish people resettled in the ancient land, after 2,000 years, will be a sort of national collective Christ, providing a light unto all other nations of the world.

Yet a satirical edge quickly vanishes when it is realised how easily Ben-Gurion could slide his political messianism into place in support of Israel's political and military adventures. The messianic

people could pursue aggressive and nationalist expansionist aims in Palestine and beyond, legitimately, because they alone were entitled to respond to an Old Testament script.

Thus he remembered Moses during the Suez Crisis of 1956, the blatantly imperialist military adventure when Israel joined Britain and France in trying to topple Egypt's leader, Colonel Nasser, who had nationalised the Suez Canal. According to Ben-Gurion, the thousands of Israeli soldiers involved in the battle of the Sinai desert between Egypt and Israel were likely to have been inspired by memories of how their Jewish ancestors had been led to Mount Sinai by Moses who had received the Ten Commandments from God:

> this was no mere battle. The halo of Sinai and all the deep and mystical experiences associated with that name for thousands of years glowed over our soldiers' heads as if their parents were present at the Mount Sinai event. (Keren 1983: 69)

Biblical quotations peppered all of Ben-Gurion's speeches. Prophetic statements were incorporated into the political language, and his biblical heroes, even when they disagreed with God, pointed ominously to his contemporary attitudes. On one occasion Ben-Gurion praised Jeroboam II, a king of biblical Israel, who 'did evil in the eyes of the Lord', but who nevertheless enlarged his kingdom by capturing Damascus (Wistrich and Ohana 1995: 69).

### BLASPHEMY! THE JEWISH RELIGION HELD 'MISTRESS OF SECULAR GOVERNMENT'

Two very accomplished Jewish religious philosophers, Martin Buber and Yeshayahu Leibowitz, who called themselves Zionists, were nevertheless appalled at the way they saw Ben-Gurion manipulating the Jewish religion for narrow political ends.

Ben-Gurion had hijacked the spiritual concept of Zion, Buber argued, which should have no place in nationalist power politics:

> Zion implies a memory, a demand, a mission. Zion is the foundation stone, the bedrock and basis of the Messianic edifice of humanity …
>   Zion in its modern form was 'Quasi-Zionism' not 'True Zionism' …
>   Quasi-Zionism is nothing more than one of the vulgar forms of nationalism in our day, one which recognizes no authority other than an imaginary national interest. (Keren 1983: 77)

Buber here is arguing that Ben-Gurion's nation-state had displaced the authority of God. At one point Buber explicitly accused Ben-Gurion of blasphemy. He argued that Ben-Gurion's secularisation 'keeps men from hearing the voice of the living God' (Keren 1983: 78).

Ben-Gurion could not dismiss Buber as a religious obscurantist. First, Buber was highly respected by believers and non-believers alike; second, Buber was keenly aware of the dilemmas facing Jewish politics in modern Palestine. By insisting that a Jewish State of the type that Ben-Gurion was defending was unacceptable to the teachings of a true Judaism, Buber was also making a statement about his humanistic brand of Judaic ethics. This was a humanist ethics incompatible with the oppression of another people. As Edward Said, Palestine's most prominent intellectual, has noted, this meant that Buber had to take a stand on what kind of modern political state should emerge in Palestine. Buber and several other Jewish humanists argued for a bi-national state (Said 2000: 314), where the Arab and Jewish communities would share power within a single constitution. For Buber it had the particular merit of unambiguously separating state politics from religion. This actually made Buber a more modern political thinker than Ben-Gurion, who deliberately cultivated the ambiguous mixing of Judaism and state politics.

Buber was a more modern political thinker and he certainly had a much more universalist vision. This became clear when the two men fell out over the trial of Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi and member of the SS, deeply implicated in the Holocaust and captured in Argentina by Israeli agents in 1960, and tried in Israel in 1961. Buber had wanted Eichmann tried at an international tribunal because his crimes were crimes against the human race as a whole. Ben-Gurion insisted that the trial should be held in Israel as a way, as Hannah Arendt observed (1963), of bolstering the legitimacy of the Jewish State.

Yeshayahu Leibowitz, another religious philosopher and scientist, was also incensed by Ben-Gurion's use of political messianism. He was particularly outraged by Ben-Gurion's biblical justification of what Leibowitz described as 'an over-zealous reprisal' (Keren 1983: 82) when an Israeli army unit, led by Ariel Sharon, killed 50 Palestinian Arab civilians at the village of Kibya. Leibowitz was not afraid to use strong language. He denounced justifications of acts of statehood on grounds of religious ethics as 'a prostitution of the Jewish religion in the interest of national cannibalism and lust for power' (Keren 1983: 83). He accused Ben-Gurion of keeping religion

'a mistress of the secular government', and defined the State of Israel under Ben-Gurion as 'a secular brat known in public as religious' (Keren 1983: 84).

Leibowitz specifically challenged Ben-Gurion on the 'sacredness' of the land, the religious idea of the 'sacred' being used in a way 'for which it was not destined, with all the danger implied by this distorted use' (Keren 1983: 83).

## BEN-GURION CALLED ARABS 'DESTROYERS' OF THE SACRED LAND

Ben-Gurion not only claimed that the 'land of Israel' was sacred, but he also believed that the Arabs had somehow contaminated it. For Ben-Gurion it is 'the land in which all the cultures will come together and from it will emerge mankind's ultimate genius, to spread its rule over the entire world', but under one condition – that the land be managed by 'its children'. For if once again the children of Israel cease to inhabit the land, it will become 'bereft of life' and be transformed into a heap of ruins. This is because of the Arabs, who, according to Ben-Gurion, in the history of the land of Israel, had behaved as 'destroyers' (Wistrich and Ohana 1995: 75).

An 'evil spirit of Israeli chauvinism' was how Isaac Deutscher, one of the twentieth century's greatest Jewish socialist writers, would describe Ben-Gurion (Deutscher 1968: 142).

Ben-Gurion even ludicrously claimed sometimes that until the arrival of new Hebrew, the land had been 'barren' for 2,000 years (Wistrich and Ohana 1995: 75). This idea had been conveniently rooted in Zionist mythology from the time of the earliest settlements in the late nineteenth century. In one of his early letters from Israel in 1906, Ben-Gurion wrote of 'foul miasma which rises from the fallow earth when it is ploughed for the first time in 2000 years' (Wistrich and Ohana 1995: 76). The early Zionists apparently believed that between the time of the destruction of the second Jewish Temple in Jerusalem by the Roman army in 70 CE and the new Zionist settlement, the land had become a crust under which noxious gases accumulated!

This is the type of rhetoric that accompanies the deeply entrenched double-barrelled Zionist myth that Palestine was a 'land without people for a people without land'. These myths are the subjects of chapters of this book. In Chapter 5 the reader will discover a thriving Arab peasant agriculture on the Palestinian land that the

early Zionists chose to settle in the late nineteenth century. Ben-Gurion's dishonesty here is particularly brazen. As we noted at the beginning of this chapter, he had firsthand experience of those early Zionist settlements, which had been purchased from absentee Arab landlords. He even had to arm himself to defend one settlement from the furious, evicted and hence ruined Arab peasantry, who had been working the land for generations.

DEMAGOGY: BEN-GURION REWRITES
THE BIBLE

On 12 May 1960 Ben-Gurion called a press conference in Tel Aviv. Local and foreign journalists, military and civilian officials, writers, artists, members of his family and other dignitaries arrived carrying pocket Bibles in their hands. The *Jerusalem Post* reported the event under the headline: 'Ben-Gurion Gives His Version of the Tale of Exodus from Egypt.' It described how the prime minister had challenged the biblical view of the Exodus by claiming that only a small minority of Hebrews had made the journey from Egypt and that the great majority of the children of Israel never went to Egypt. Serious Bible critics had been making this point for years, but Ben-Gurion claimed that the source of inspiration for this insight was the 1948 War of Independence and the settlement patterns of modern Israel (Keren 1983: 102). It is tempting to conclude that he was cynically catching up with what would slowly emerge as the scholarly consensus. But for Ben-Gurion it was the 'revolutionary occurrences' after 1948 that were providing new insights into ancient history.

Of course, a great debate ensued, which always suited Ben-Gurion because such debates reinforced the Bible's authority as the reference point for directing the country.

Biblical scholars were unimpressed. His most effective critic turned out to be a right-wing Bible scholar, Israel Eldad. Eldad accused Ben-Gurion of media sensationalism and misuse of political power. Eldad compared the publicity surrounding the archaeological discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls with the way Ben-Gurion had used the media to promote his biblical 'discovery' about Exodus. His argument was that the archaeological excavations revealed material findings while Ben-Gurion's news conference involved mere hypotheses. Hypotheses ought to be thoroughly investigated rather than be presented to the public. That Ben-Gurion was the country's prime minister made this obvious caution even more vital.

As Eldad, and many others, pointed out, there was an important difference between the statesman and the scholar. To the statesman engaged in symbolic politics, the medium might be as important as the message. To the scholar, any but the most important forum to express the message might lead to distortion. The scholar works alone, nourished by peer review, and is confined to a relatively small audience. The statesman speaks to large crowds, unable to listen with the necessary scepticism and who take his authority for granted. This was obviously detrimental to any evaluation of knowledge (Keren 1983: 117).

Eldad distinguished three approaches to the subject. First, there is the believer who accepts the story, by definition, because it is in God's book. Second, there is the scientist, who has exactly the opposite approach. Nothing in the Bible should be beyond doubt, whether supernatural events or 'natural' ones. Third, there is the interpreter who studies the Bible not for its own sake but as a means of deriving contemporary, or universal, lessons. All three approaches are legitimate provided they are kept distinct, Eldad's complaint was that Ben-Gurion had conflated them (Keren 1983: 114).

Eldad had touched Zionism's raw nerve. In the end science and religion were incompatible. Within Zionism, the tension between the two becomes unbearable when Jewish history is subjected to the rules of evidence-based argument and scholarship; that is, when there is proper adherence to the standards of scientific inquiry.[5]

### IN SEARCH OF 'ANCIENT ISRAEL'

We need now to disentangle three factors: the Zionist misuse of the Bible stories, the Bible stories themselves and the historical period that the Bible is claiming to describe. This will take us to the argument literally at the 'cutting edge' of Israeli archaeology. But first let us try to set out the background using as our focus 'Ancient Israel'. We have an immediate difficulty because there are several 'Ancient Israels' in the Bible. We will concentrate on the so-called 'United Monarchy of David and Solomon' from about 1000 to 922 BCE, because this is the 'Ancient Israel' upon which Zionism makes its most outrageous claim.

Readers with any familiarity with the Bible may recall that the land of the time had another name, Canaan. One of the astonishing features that always crops up when serious historical and archaeological research engages with the biblical stories is that the artifacts which have been discovered are clearly Canaanite rather than

'Israelite'. In fact 'Israelite' artifacts have *never* been discovered from this period. But perhaps that doesn't matter. After all, the Bible stories carry images so powerful that even the most sceptical assume there must be at least grains of historical authenticity.

After all, which schoolchild does not know that David (who would become the Israelite king of the 'United Monarchy'), in his warrior days, toppled the Philistine Goliath with a slingshot? Is this not one of the greatest, and certainly one of the most famous, single acts of courage that has been passed down to us from the ancient world? It's an invitation from the Bible that we can hardly refuse, to take for granted the Israelite David's moral and spiritual superiority over the Philistine, Goliath. It is a fable etched deeply into the imagination of Western civilisation, and brilliantly captured in the European High Renaissance by Michelangelo's sculpture of 'David', and by the painter Rembrandt in his stunning *David Presenting the Head of Goliath to King Saul*.

Nevertheless, modern Zionism has shown increasing difficulty defending the biblical David as a credible historical personality and, at the same time, absorbing the implications of serious biblical analysis and archaeological research.

In the 1980s a prominent Israeli politician, Abba Eban, with a reputation as an outstanding Bible scholar, presented a television documentary, *Heritage, Civilisation and the Jews*. The series, which was accompanied by a best-selling, beautifully illustrated coffee-table book, purported to show the history of the Jews from biblical times to the present day. What was interesting about the series were the concessions that Eban repeatedly had to make to serious critical Bible scholarship and archaeological discoveries, which undermined his Zionist beliefs about the Bible. This was starkly revealed when he came to the David and Goliath fable. As he pointed out, 'Biblical antagonism towards the Philistines survives in the term's modern meaning: a *philistine* is a person ignorant of, or smugly hostile to, culture' (Eban 1984: 45). And he admitted in the very next sentence 'The fact is however that outside the fields of theology and ethics, the cultural accomplishments of the Philistines were markedly superior to those of the Israelites.' A really wonderful colour photograph drives home the point. It is of an exquisitely decorated vessel with the unambiguous caption: 'the Philistines were not barbarians but skilled craftsmen' (Eban 1984: 40).

How did he know, at least in theology and ethics, that the Israelites were superior to the Philistines? The answer is that he does not. This is what Bible critics call an example of *redaction*. The Bible

stories were written much later, so any claims about the respective merits of the belief systems of the Philistines and the Israelites at this time are impossible to sustain. To use a concept much favoured by Bible critics, the stories may well be *apocryphal*; in other words, inventions. In any case, as Eban was compelled to make clear, the Bible itself raises many difficulties about the religious and historical life of David and Solomon.

### BIBLICAL CONFUSION AND MELTDOWN OVER DAVID AND SOLOMON

On the one hand, there is the enormous impact of David: the 'messianic' tradition starts with him. Later Hebrew prophets were so impressed with what seemed to be God's special blessing on David that they envisaged a future monarch, an anointed one, or *maschiach*, the Hebrew word for Messiah (Eban 1984: 47). Nearly 1,000 years later, Psalm XXIII captured the monotheistic and messianic tradition, for both Judaism and Christianity:

> The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want …
> though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
> I will fear no evil: for thou *art* with me …
> … thou annointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
> Surely, goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of
> my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

> (cited Eban 1984: 48)

On the other hand, David indulged in one of the great biblical scandals, expressing contempt for any system of theology and ethics in his dealings with local tribal chieftains, whether friend or foe. He impregnated Bathsheba whilst her husband, Uriah the Hittite, was away fighting the Ammonites on David's behalf. Uriah was then sent to the 'hottest battle' where his comrades were to leave him, on David's orders, to die at the hands of the enemy (II Samuel 11: 15; Eban 1984: 49).

According to the highly respected contemporary Bible scholar, Karen Armstrong, David's conduct would have offended even contemporary standards of 'pagan' justice, let alone later standards of Jewish justice (Armstrong 1996: 40).[6]

Like Abba Eban, the writer Paul Johnson, in his very popular *History of the Jews*, is desperately keen to stand by the Bible stories, yet even his reading of the Bible has cast doubt on David's Israelite origins: 'He was originally a shepherd descended from the humble and enchanting Ruth the Moabitess …' (Johnson 1993: 55).

The problem is even greater with Solomon. Like David, his pedigree is suspect, for he was, after all, David's second son by Bathsheba. Solomon developed the most spectacular empire, specialising in pagan marriages of convenience. As Eban tells us:

> His ships built and manned in large part by the Phoenicians, sailed to Arabia, East Africa, and India … bringing back gold and ivory, sandalwood and precious stones, even peacocks and monkeys for the Royal Court … the Queen of Sheba came overland from southern Arabia with camels that bore spices and very much gold (I Kings 10: 2) … And … Dynastic marriages – with Ammonite, Edomite, Hittite, Moabite, and Phoenician princesses, as well as with Pharaoh's daughter were signed to add both to the glory of the court and to the stability of the kingdom. (Eban 1984: 50–1)

And it was Solomon, of course, who built the first Temple at Jerusalem. Eban ties himself up in knots as he tries to reconcile the biblical claim with the pagan temple-building programme which typified the period.

Eban begins by noting that local pagan monarchs, like the Phoenician Hiram of Tyre, supplied the skilled craftsmen and masons and the building materials, the famed 'cedars of Lebanon'.

Eban asks to what extent these architectural borrowings should be taken as evidence of a deeper bond between the religions of the Canaanites and Phoenicians and the religion of Israel.

His answer is very important because, although he does not say so, it reflects the struggle between science and religion within Israeli archaeology, which was developing at the time he was writing his book and which has since reached crisis proportions:

> The differences in religious belief should be plain enough … and there were also significant divergences in religious practice. Israel was … forbidden to worship its deity in the form of an image, and human sacrifice, cult prostitution, and orgiastic fertility rites were likewise excluded. *But we should not blind ourselves to the ways in which ancient*

> *Israelite worship more closely resembles Canaanite practice than it does the Jewish religion since Roman times.* [emphasis added]
>
>     The most obvious borrowing – and the most striking divergence from later Jewish practice – is the sacrificial rite, highly developed at least since Sumerian times. The Temple sacrifice was the centre of state religion in the age of Solomon and remained so as long as the Temple remained in Jerusalem. (Eban 1984: 50)

By recognising the break between ancient forms of worship and the religion called Judaism, Eban is undermining Zionist insistence on a continuous line from the early Bible stories and the present day.

But we must now turn to a much bigger problem, which goes to the very heart of Zionist interpretation of the Bible.

### ANCIENT ISRAEL: WHERE WAS THE WORD?

The Jewish religion celebrates the power of words, the most famous of which are the Ten Commandments which Moses is supposed to have received from God on Mount Sinai, over 3,000 years ago, as he led the former Hebrew slaves out of bondage in Egypt, towards the 'Promised Land' which would become (Ancient) Israel. The Old Testament is full of holy words which provide spiritual guidance for the Jewish people as a religious people. These are, of course, *written* words, with hugely sophisticated meaning, providing a profound system of theology and ethics, which continue to inspire millions of people in the modern world. Yet we have still to uncover any trace of written words from the period of the United Monarchy of David and Solomon, Ancient Israel, just under 3,000 years ago. And that is the problem. The written word marks a society's advance in terms of its civilisation. Ancient Israel is portrayed as an advanced form of civilisation, but where are its words?

According to Finkelstein and Silberman, authors of the path-breaking book, *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of its Sacred Texts*, not a single trace of tenth-century BCE Israelite literary activity has ever been discovered (Finkelstein and Silberman 2002: 235–8). As Israel Finkelstein is one of modern Israel's leading archaeologists, the implications are far-reaching. They reflect nothing less than the implosion of Israeli archaeology.

Literacy in the ancient world, record-keeping, administrative correspondence, royal chronicles and the compiling of religious

scripture '*especially one as proud and as sophisticated as the Bible are linked to a particular stage of social development, namely state formation with a centralized religious cult and monarchy*' (Finkelstein and Silberman 2002: 22; emphasis added). The implication is that the failure to discover literary activity at this time suggests that there was no state formation, centralised cult or monarchy. Yet Solomon's Temple was the crowning glory of a building programme that rivalled those of the Pharaohs.

After decades of excavation, using details from the Bible to search for the remains of these buildings, a scholarly consensus is slowly and very reluctantly emerging amongst the archaeologists of modern Israel, that the buildings never existed, or rather there are the remains of buildings but they cannot be dated to the period of Solomon:

> Jerusalem has been excavated time and again … fieldwork … failed to provide significant evidence for tenth century occupation (the period of David and Solomon). Not only was any sign of monumental architecture missing, but so were even simple pottery sherds … The most optimistic assessment of this negative evidence is that tenth century Jerusalem was rather limited in extent, perhaps not more than a typical hill country village. (Finkelstein and Silberman 2002: 33)

A temple certainly was built in Jerusalem, several centuries later, probably in the tiny city-state of Judah. Indeed, this is Finkelstein's argument for the period when the Bible itself began to take written form. But the fact of the matter is that the David and Solomon stories are the figment of some of the ancient world's most creative imaginations (Finkelstein and Silberman 2002: 123–45).

## 'GOD'S BIBLE? LOOK AT IT – IT WAS MADE AS A LIE BY THE FALSE PEN OF SCRIBES' (JEREMIAH VIII. 8)

In the 1980s the journalist John McCarthy was one of a number of Europeans and Americans taken hostage by Islamic militants in Beirut. His endurance made him and fellow captives famous. McCarthy read the Bible twice during his captivity, not least because it was the only book his militant Islamic prison guards would allow the hostages.

He became intrigued by 'Ancient Israel' and when he was released went in search of it, only to stumble across teams of Israeli

archaeologists, like the one led by Finkelstein, who had also been looking for it in vain. McCarthy became so fascinated that he decided to make a television documentary about it: *It Ain't Necessarily So*. Now his producers must have panicked at its radical content because the six half-hour transmissions were given a midnight slot with minimum publicity and hardly anyone watched them.[7]

A flavour of the devastating impact of the documentary is given by the translation from the prophet Jeremiah, which opens the narrative of each half-hour programme:

> God's Bible? Look at it – it was made as a lie by the false pen of scribes. (Jeremiah VIII. 8; Sturgis 2001: 186)

Rather like the Philistines, Jeremiah has had a very poor press over the last two millennia and dismissed as the prophet of doom – another example of the way the Bible and its prejudices haunt the modern imagination.

Actually, it is possible that Jeremiah may have been a very honest witness in the tiny city-state of Judah (about which more in a moment), at the time when some books of the Bible were possibly taking written form.

McCarthy based his series on the work of Israeli archaeologists like Finkelstein and his colleague, Professor Ze'ev Herzog. In October 1999, Herzog summarised their discoveries in a sensational article in the magazine of the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz* ('Deconstructing the Walls of Jericho', *Ha'aretz Magazine*, 29 October 1999: 6–8). In the article, Herzog described how what he calls the 'crisis stage' in Israeli archaeology has matured in recent years. He described it as nothing less than a scientific revolution. It is a process well known to all research scientists familiar with the dynamic of scientific breakthrough:

> A crisis stage is reached when the theories within the framework of the general thesis are unable to solve an increasingly large number of anomalies. The explanations become ponderous and inelegant, and the pieces do not lock together …
>
> This is what archaeologists have learned from their excavations in the Land of Israel: the Israelites were never in Egypt, did not wander the desert, did not conquer the land in a military campaign and did not pass it on to the 12 tribes of Israel. Perhaps even harder to swallow is

the fact that the united monarchy of David & Solomon which is described by the Bible as a regional power, was at most a small tribal kingdom … (*Ha'aretz*, 29 October, 1999)

In other words, no Abraham, no Moses, no Joshua; David and Solomon at best pagan tribal chieftains. He goes on: 'And it will come as an unpleasant shock to many that the God of Israel, Jehovah, had a female consort …'. Her name is Asherah and she has her own programme in John McCarthy's series. As Matthew Sturgis, who wrote the book accompanying McCarthy's series, explains:

> Asherah is identified as another Canaanite deity. She was a fertility goddess and the recognized consort of the chief god El (and later of Baal). Many small figurines representing her have been found at early Canaanite sites. The statuettes, with their large breasts and well-defined sexual organs, are closely related to those found at the slightly later Israelite sites. It is a relationship that has led scholars to suggest that Israelite fertility figurines may represent Asherah too. (Sturgis 2001: 186)

Notice how archaeology is now compelled to shake off significant distinctions between Canaanite and Israelite sites. At some point *after* the biblical fiction known as the United Monarchy of David and Solomon, perhaps about two centuries later, very roughly 800–700 BCE, a historical entity called Israel did emerge, though in its first incarnation it was distinctively pagan, with a pagan god, Jehovah, and goddess, Asherah. Furthermore, Jerusalem was not its spiritual centre.

In the late 1960s, the archaeologist Bill Dever discovered Asherah, in inscription form, written in ancient Hebrew, when he was carrying out excavations at Khirbet el-Kom near Hebron. On the wall of a late Iron Age tomb, dating from the mid- to late eighth century BCE, he discovered a bold drawing of what appeared to be a hand together with an inscription that ran: 'Blessed … by Yahweh [Jehovah] … and his Asherah.' Dever recalls:

> When I first discovered it, I didn't really want to publish it, as a young scholar. It was too controversial. But then in the 1970s a second site was found by Israeli archaeologists – also in the eighth century in Sinai. And you have the same expression: 'may X be blessed by Yahweh and his Asherah'. (Sturgis 2001: 173)

This discovery was made at Kuntillet Ajrud, in northeastern Sinai. The inscription, written in ink on an old storage jar, was accompanied by a drawing of two curious figures, one apparently male, the other female, and both crowned. As Dever remarks, 'It seems that Yahweh did have a consort, like all the other gods of the ancient Near East – at least in the minds of many Israelites.'

Like all the other gods of the ancient Near East …

As Herzog has argued, the discovery of inscriptions in ancient Hebrew that mention pairs of gods, Jehovah and Asherah, much later than the United Monarchy period, throws wide open the question of exactly when monotheism was adopted. And it seems likely that the small tribal kingdoms of David and Solomon, if they existed at all, worshipped polytheistic pagan gods.

Now, archaeologists like Herzog and Finkelstein are not particularly politically minded, but they are very conscious of the implications of their research for modern Israel's ideological claims to the biblical past.

Herzog reports that the Israeli public are trying to ignore the findings despite the fact that they have been known for decades. He goes on:

> Any attempt to question the reliability of the biblical descriptions is perceived as an attempt to undermine 'our historic right to the land' and as shattering the myth of the nation that is renewing the ancient Kingdom of Israel. These symbolic elements constitute such a critical component of the construction of Israeli identity that any attempt to call their veracity into question encounters hostility or silence … The blow to the mythical foundations of the Israeli identity is apparently too threatening, and it is more convenient to turn a blind eye. (*Ha'aretz*, 29 October 1999)

How progressive Israeli archaeologists like Herzog and Finkelstein are now beginning to explain the origins of the Bible is beyond the scope of this book.[8] But one intriguing irony deserves further comment. They argue that the 'real' Ancient Israel was a pagan state, with Samaria its 'capital' or spiritual centre. Readers will be familiar with the modern Zionist claim on Judaea and Samaria on Palestine's West Bank. Less well known is the explosively bitter religious feud between Judaea and Samaria, or rather to use their biblical names, Judah and Israel.

Herzog and Finkelstein argue that it is this feud that partly lays the foundation for the Bible stories and for the real birth of Judaism. It is a feud in which Judah, or Judaea, its Roman name, became the ultimate victor. Samaria (the real 'Ancient Israel') became an outcast. By the first century CE, Samaria, with its own temple far away from Jerusalem and home to the 'Good Samaritan' of Gospel fame, was considered not properly Jewish at all by the priestly authorities at the Temple at Jerusalem in Judaea. In other words, 2,000 years ago, the century of the great Jewish revolt against Rome, the 'real' Ancient Israel was not considered Jewish.

In the next chapter we will explore the damaging implications of this for modern Zionist claims on Palestine when we look at the Jewish Diaspora in the Roman Empire. But we should not leave this chapter before we have paid our unqualified respects to the great Jewish Bible writers of ancient times. The Bible is most certainly not a mandate for modern Jewish chauvinist claims on the land of Palestine, but, with Finkelstein and Silberman, we can most certainly agree that it is a

> sacred scripture of unparalleled literary and spiritual genius … an epic saga woven together from an astonishingly rich collection of historical writings, memories, legends, folk tales, anecdotes, royal propaganda,[9] prophecy and ancient poetry … the literary masterpiece would undergo further editing and elaboration (so that it would) become a spiritual anchor … for communities all over the world. (Finkelstein and Silberman 2002: 1–2)