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HIDDEN HISTORIES

Palestine and the Eastern Mediterranean

Basem L. Ra'ad



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Credits

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Palestinian art works: Figure 6.1, I, Isma‘il (Suleiman Mansour, clay, 1998); Figure 8.2, Wall in the Head (Ahmad Canaan, stone carving, 2007); Figure 8.3, Untitled (Mustafa el Hallaj); Figure 9.3, Cat and Jet (Farid Abu Shaqra, 2005); Figure 11.4 The Palestinian village of Deir Samet, Hebron region (Suleiman Mansour, 1982).

Front cover: Olive Grove (Suleiman Mansour, oil, 1980).

Back cover: Al Quds (Suleiman Mansour, oil, 1978).

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Preface

A corrective history of Palestine, its region, its people and its cultures has not yet been written. I am not speaking about the narration of recent events in Palestine and surrounding areas, but of a total vision that would encompass both ancient and modern times.

Briefly, a comprehensive history of this kind has been prevented by a combination of factors: the confusion between historical facts and religious narratives, divergent public perceptions in the West and in the region itself over centuries, the self-interested perpetuation of past misconceptions, and now the dissonant agendas of scholarship. The land has never been really free from colonization—whether in terms of control by successive empires or in terms of its association with religious imaginaries or political designs based on them. Its present fate—as a region divided into “countries” and a Palestine colonized by Israel—is largely the result of a misconstrued ancient history built on invention, misconception, and later conspiracy. There is a profound silence and suppression of knowledge concerning a past that continues to be misinterpreted. As a result, the real past remains unfulfilled. It demands to be retrieved and revealed. It wants to dispel a darkness that pretends to be light.

Scholarship has not been as helpful here as it has been in other situations. Mind-changing discoveries over the past 150 years have thrown previously held certainties into doubt and shown them to be unhistorical. Such discoveries offer the prospect of a revised and more enlightened understanding of the region. But because religious and now also political investments have become so entangled with mythic assumptions, there is enormous resistance to accepting the full implications of an increasing number of archaeological and epigraphic findings that, because they challenge mainstream thinking, continue to be ignored. The scholarship (whether Western, Israeli, or regional), being part of the dominant systems that generate and sustain it, remains largely either complicit or limited. It generally hangs onto old notions or interprets new findings within preset moulds, at the same time as nascent alternative approaches are either attacked or buried. Whether on the scholarly or public level, there is much to “unlearn” in what people have been led to believe

or think they know—as a first step toward reframing attitudes, deepening insights and nourishing growth in human consciousness.

This book employs a diversity of means for extracting and interpreting information, as I explain in the introduction. Since it is more arduous to gather evidence when one's approach runs against the grain, it becomes necessary to extrapolate and to find alternative methods in order to recover as much as possible of the silenced past. Part One of the book, "Ancient Myths, Religions, and Cultures," synthesizes significant findings that dispel common cultural misconceptions and dismantle the usual monopolies associated with the three regional monotheisms. The assumption of a nicely sequenced "Abrahamic tradition" is the most treacherous trap in public thinking and the root of many unfounded claims. Another major source of misunderstanding about the region is the affiliated construct called "Western civilization," whose ingredients are analyzed in Chapter 1. The following chapters demonstrate that there are undeniable continuities between the three monotheisms and preceding polytheisms, and that the cultural contributions of the region are better recognized when approached without biased assumptions implicit in the monotheistic tradition and in elements of "Western civilization." Part Two, "Modern Myths and (De)Colonized History," moves from the past to its present symptoms and raises the question of how a colonized people can hope to write a useful history. Its chapters deal with issues related to identity formation, cultural appropriation, self-colonization, the political enforcement of place names, and the remnants of the past in present customs.

I should clarify here that I use the term "East Mediterranean" as a partial replacement for the colonial term "Middle East"—a term that political rhetoric has now expanded farther east to include even places like Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. This alternative geographic designation, the East Mediterranean, includes, generally, what was previously called "the Levant." Specifically, it refers to an area that forms a kind of cultural crescent, extending from Greece, through Asia Minor (present Turkey) and Greater Syria (today's Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine), inland to the east to incorporate present-day Iraq, and running southwest through the Sinai Desert into Egypt. I conceive of the eastern Mediterranean as a unit consisting of many socio-cultural intersections. In this way, I partly intend to remove the appropriation of ancient Greece into the construct called "Western civilization." My more immediate concern is with the region encompassing Greater Syria, Egypt, and

what is called Mesopotamia—a region that originated much of “civilization” as we know it today.

In this region, Palestine stands as a real land bridge. It has been, also, the imaginary, the type, for holy constructions and unholy practices. It is ironic that a region usually described as “the cradle of civilization,” and associated with crucial innovations in ancient times, should now be so enmeshed in troubles and in uncertainties about what is true and what is false, what is real and what is invented. It is clearly a region of contradictions that must concern everyone in the world today. More so than ever, its fate affects human principles and sanity, and demands a re-conceptualization of received ideas: how to approach historical knowledge and construct beliefs, how to expose fallacies, and how to interrogate or accept information. A renewed and more comprehensive understanding of Palestine and its region is urgently relevant to epistemic issues of all kinds.

Producing this book has involved a long journey, not so much in the actual time it took to write it as in what made its direction possible and necessary. It is a search for what remains of a people’s history that has been effaced, buried, and is still ignored today. My years of study, travel, and daily life in North America and eastern Mediterranean regions led me to an insistent realization that more attention had to be directed to disentangling the implications of what has been said or written about historical Palestine in the context of the knowledge tools available now, rather than relying on religious convictions and acquired beliefs as substitutes for research and inquiry. It is essential to develop a language of questioning and to peel back the old accretions that have clouded perceptions.

The book’s content is the result of a conflation of many circumstances and findings, among them happy coincidences and serendipities. I have been helped by a great number of people over the years—through discussions, reflections, and the sharing of ideas. I thank all those who helped for their support and suggestions. My close friends and family have been my greatest motivators and contributors to my work, and it is to them that I dedicate this book. Above all, I am grateful to the people of Palestine and the surrounding region, in villages and towns, who will not be aware quite how much they are the source of all that I have written.

*Basem L. Ra'ad
Jerusalem*

