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The Impact of ‘Biblical Orientalism’ in Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Palestine

LORENZO KAMEL*

ABSTRACT *‘Biblical Orientalism’ can be defined as a phenomenon based on the combination of a selective use of religion and a simplifying way to approach its natural habitat: the ‘Holy Land’. Between the 1830s and the beginning of the 20th century this attitude triggered a flood of mainly British books, private diaries and maps. Over time this enormous production, accompanied by a wide range of phenomena such as evangelical tourism, did instill the idea of a ‘meta-Palestine’, an imaginary place devoid of any history except that of Biblical magnificence. This has had various relevant consequences. The present article aims to deconstruct this perception by observing the process through which a local complex reality has been simplified and denied in its continuity.*

Introduction

According to an old Spanish saying, ‘when there is a flood, the first thing that lacks is drinkable water’. In the Palestinian context ‘Biblical Orientalism’ produced something similar to a flood that has had various lasting consequences to the present day. A plethora of books, private diaries and maps – most of them realized by the Palestine Exploration Fund – followed by a wide range of phenomena such as ‘evangelical tourism’, instilled in Britain and beyond what Meron Benvenisti defined as ‘the imaginary perception of Palestine based on the Bible’.¹

Such enormous literary production, often focused on the links between Biblical events and the physical characteristics of Palestine, favored the affirmation of an historical chronology that had the tendency to focus almost exclusively on Biblical times and the Crusades, largely ignoring millennia of pre-Biblical history and centuries of Islamic domination. This helped to fix numerous toponyms in the Western collective memory that have covered up the original ‘non-Biblical’ geography, preventing or hindering the development of an alternative and inclusive local history.

In the more than one thousand books and travel diaries that were written about the ‘Holy Land’ by European authors between the 1830s and the beginning of the twentieth century, the local populations – including the Arab majority and the Jewish minority – were often, and not by chance, portrayed as a simple appendix to the ancient Biblical scenarios. More precisely, both places and peoples were depicted as ‘shadows’ of a far off past, ‘fossils’ suspended in time: ‘Every object’, commented London painter William Henry Bartlett (1809-1854) referring to the Jaffa area, ‘is novel and Oriental in character, and independent of its picturesque beauty, is linked by a delicious association with our earliest dreams of Biblical

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¹ P. Scham, W. Salem, B. Pogrud (eds.), *Shared Histories. A Palestinian-Israeli Dialogue* (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2005), 85.

scenery and incident'.² Through these kinds of attitudes, the idea of a 'meta-Palestine', an imaginary place devoid of any history except that of Biblical magnificence, was introduced. The scope of this article is to deconstruct this perception by observing the process through which a local complex reality has been simplified and denied in its continuity.

In the following section I will provide a general introduction which will untangle the reasoning behind 'Biblical Orientalism' (along with the grander inclination to standardize the complexity of the 'other') and assess the impact it has had within the specific Palestinian context, as well as in the broader region. Then I shall focus on the Palestine Exploration Fund, one of the most powerful results of Biblical Orientalism, and its attempt to create a parallelism between the ancient Israelites and the 'New Chosen People', namely the English. Based on this analysis, I shall demonstrate that an overwhelming proportion of the approaches and actions adopted at the time were the products of an attempt to (mis)appropriate the Biblical past for political and imperial purposes. These efforts, largely successful, were carried out through the 'veni, vidi, vici' approach drawn up by Clifford Geertz (1926-2006),³ that is the idea of dealing with the habits of local populations without passing first through the meaning system which the latter attributed to their social, cultural and religious life. The 'land of the Bible' provides in this respect a unique framework for a deeper understanding of this attitude. As Neil Asher Silberman has noted, 'to possess the land of the Bible means to interpret its history. This aspect has remained constant. Only the interpreters have changed'.⁴

Simplification of the 'other': Biblical Orientalism in a broader framework

'Biblical Orientalism', a *sui generis* variation of the heterogeneous phenomenon known as Orientalism,⁵ is a topic to which Edward Said (1935-2003) did not devote the attention one might have expected.⁶ It can be defined as a phenomenon based on the combination of a selective use of religion and a simplifying way to approach its natural habitat: the 'Holy Land'.

The tendency to simplify the other is a mental approach common to every attempt to control, exploit or subjugate other human beings. This means that the colonizer has a marked inclination to define, and indeed rationalize, the colonized. These processes of rationalization, James Scott noted, 'did not successfully represent the actual activity of the society they depicted, nor were they intended to; they represented only that slice of it that interested the official observer'.⁷

Such (mis)representations have often triggered a paradoxical mechanism. That which the colonized have sought to liberate, when fighting to assert their identity against a colonial one, turns out to originate in the perception of the world imposed by the colonizer himself. In the words of Tamim al-Barghouti:

When a white man comes to the shores of Africa and calls the Africans black, he

² W.H. Bartlett, *Walks about the City and Environs of Jerusalem*, (London: Georges Virtue, 1844), 9.

³ C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York (Basic Books, 1973), 20.

⁴ N.A. Silberman, *Digging for God and Country* (New York: Knopf, 1982), 202.

⁵ On the origins of Orientalism see M. Rodinson, *Europe and the Mystique of Islam*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 1988), 40-44.

⁶ As noted by Bar-Yosef, the 'Holy Land is rather marginalized in Orientalism ... [Edward] Said very rarely stops to think about the distinct nature Western interests in the Holy Land, which might distinguish it from other Orientalist encounters'. E. Bar-Yosef, *The Holy Land in English Culture, 1799-1917* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005), 6.

⁷ J.C. Scott, *Seeing like a State* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1998), 7.

occupies language, for they are not black at all, it is he who is pale. The next step, after calling them black, is drawing a boundary and naming the place [...]. When the people who find themselves lumped together inside that magical circle recognized by the international community as a legitimate border try to struggle for their independence, they seldom realize that they are struggling for a name that is not theirs and trying to liberate an institution that was created to deprive them of liberty.⁸

As highlighted by post-colonial theorists Frantz Fanon (1925-1961) and Amílcar Cabral (1924–1973), every process of decolonization implies *in primis* the liberation on the part of the native from the image imposed on him from the outside and its replacement with another rooted in the traditions and in the history of the place. In certain contexts, however, an unexpected tendency is witnessed. The colonized, in line with that which has been highlighted above, is in fact driven to adopt the perception of reality put forth by the mind of the colonizer, accepting the symbols and traditions created by him in order to better filter the colonized. Thus, and paraphrasing Benita Parry, the coercive power has had in some historical settings a seductive turn.⁹

The Eastern Mediterranean area – an expression which should be preferred to the more diffused Middle East¹⁰ – is in this sense one of the best expressions of such an approach. To realize this, it suffices to turn, for example, to the paintings created in Europe in the years following the Battle of Lepanto (1571), when the Muslim fleets of the Ottoman Empire faced the vessels of the Christian Holy League. Because European Christians considered the cross an evocative symbol of their religion, the crescent moon automatically (as, in some respects, the Star of David for the Jews) was read by European artists as being the same for Muslims. Hence the Christian fleets were depicted – as sumptuously shown in the frescoes within the Galleria Colonna in Rome – with crossed sails and the Turkish ones with the crescent moon. The latter symbol, however, did not hold such significance within the culture that it was meant to represent. It was in fact utilized exclusively for decorative purposes and not only in the *dār al-Islām*. Over the centuries, as has happened for numerous other issues, the dominant Western vision led the majority of Muslims to accept and afterwards to use a religious symbol of identity-representation attributed to them from outside.¹¹ The attempts to interpret and to simplify the ‘other’ are therefore rooted in a very distant past.

In order to understand the effects that the inclination to standardize the complexity of the ‘other’ had within the specific Palestinian context, it is sufficient to mention the maps created by the British authorities in the decades preceding and following the beginning of the Mandate (1920-1948). They were, in fact, tools that in a first phase (1871-1884), through the ‘geo-theology’ of the Palestine Exploration Fund, fished in the mythical past of Biblical Palestine to apply it to that present reality, and that subsequently, beginning with World War I and due to a selective choice of colors, dimensions and names, were used to impose a mental framework destined to shape the future of the region in an increasingly conscious way. As noted recently by the anthropologist Efrat Ben-Ze’ev:

⁸ T. Al-Barghouti, *The Umma and the Dawla* (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 78.

⁹ B. Parry, *Delusions and Discoveries* (London: Penguin Press, 1972).

¹⁰ The expression Middle East, made popular in 1902 by Alfred Mahan (1804-1914), an American Navy officer, is burdened by negative, colonial, connotations. The fact that the expression ‘Middle East’ is today quite common also in the Arab countries confirms the strength of that ‘seductive side’ of the coercive power to which Benita Parry referred.

¹¹ Bernard Lewis and Buntzie Ellis Churchill, *Islam: The Religion and the People* (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson, 2009), 47.

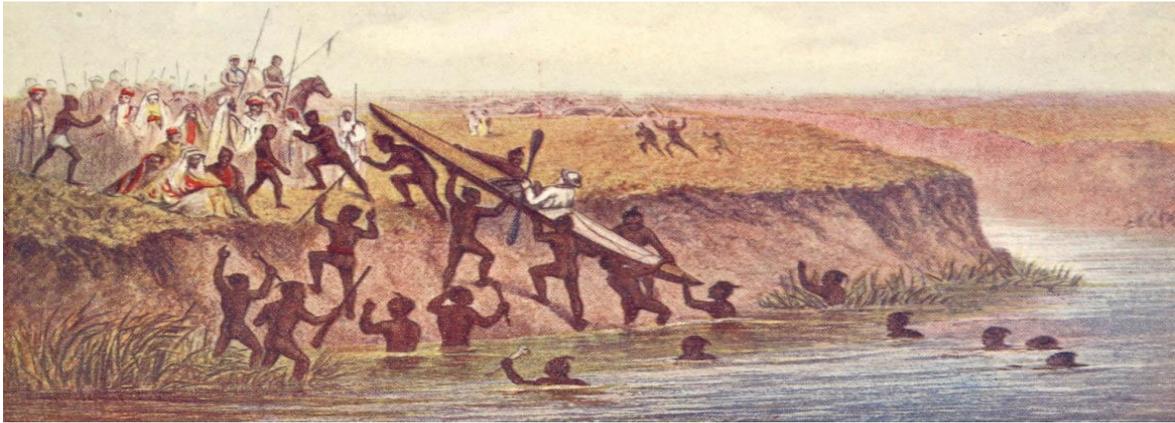


Figure 1: J. MacGregor, *The Rob Roy on the Jordan* (London: Murray, 1904). The image represents an example of the effects that the inclination to standardize the complexity of the ‘other’ had within the specific Palestinian context. It is placed on the frontispiece of the book with the caption ‘Captured on Jordan by the Arabs of Hooleh [Hula]’. John MacGregor (1815-1892) visited Palestine in 1868-69. The ‘naked and black’ figures immortalized on the image are the Arabs who attacked his canoe in the Hula Valley. In describing them MacGregor noted that ‘their heads were like cocoa-nuts, with only one hair-lock left at the top, for Mahomet to hold them by at last’ (p. 4).

The maps also create a certain illusion regarding settlement sizes: in Arab villages, where houses were close to one another, the map identifies the single cluster of the built-on area (contrasting it with the surrounding area by way of colour). In contrast, the new pre-planned Zionist rural settlements had farms adjacent to the homes and thus, the area defined as “built-on” in the map encompassed the farms and stretched on larger tracts. As an outcome, Jewish settlements seem larger on the map, although the number of their inhabitants was often lower than that of Arab villages. As [Mark] Monmonier (1991) points out, the larger the “object” is on the map, the more prominence it gains in the eyes of the viewer.¹²

In this case as well, the British obstinacy and desire to identify symbols in addition to well-defined borders and to the relative use of a plethora of terms on the maps to define such concepts (international boundary, village boundary, district boundary, sub-district boundary, fiscal block boundary, municipal boundary, triangulation point boundary, quarter boundary, qita’ boundary) did not respond to any need of the local populations.¹³ The latter were mostly ignored, demonstrating what Beshara Doumani defined as ‘the amazing ability to discover the land without discovering the people’.¹⁴

¹² E. Ben-Ze’ev, *Remembering Palestine in 1948* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2011), 34. Scott emphasized that the maps ‘are designed to summarize precisely those aspects of a complex world that are of immediate interest to the map-maker and to ignore the rest’. Scott, *Seeing*, 87.

¹³ Already in 1904 Leo Amery (1873–1955) noted: ‘I don’t suppose the end of Anglo-Russian rivalry in Asia will come till all those regions have been fully developed and till our boundaries march side by side in the same fashion that boundaries do in Europe’. Amery to Balfour, Nov. 5, 1904. British Library Manuscript Collection [hereafter BLMC] – Balfour Papers – Add. 49775.

¹⁴ B. Doumani, ‘Rediscovering Ottoman Palestine: Writing Palestinians into History’, *Journal of Palestine studies*, 21, no. 2 (1992), 8.

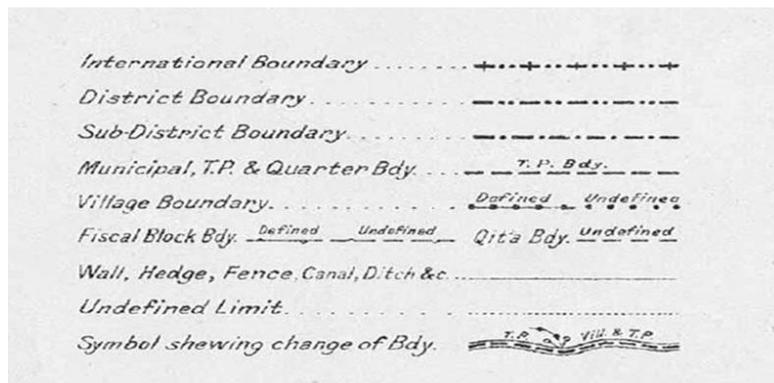


Figure 2: Terminology adopted in a map of Palestine realized at the beginning of the British Mandate. E. Ben-Ze'ev, "Cartographic Imagination: British Mandate Construction of Palestine", in S. Tewari Jassal, E. Ben-Ari (eds.), *The Partition Motif in Contemporary Conflicts* (New Delhi: Sage, 2007), 108.

The Palestine Exploration Fund as a case study

The Palestine Exploration Fund (PEF) represented one of the most successful research organizations created in nineteenth-century Europe. Established in London in 1865 following a visit to Palestine by the Prince of Wales¹⁵ and inspired by the British Consul to Jerusalem James Finn,¹⁶ the PEF was initially financed by two major donations (Queen Victoria (1819-1901), patron of the Fund, gave £150 and the University of Oxford £500) and by public subscriptions. Afterwards, starting in 1867, it became largely dependent on the War Office and the Royal Engineers.

Before focusing on this organization, it is important to mention that just five years after the foundation of the PEF, the American Palestine Exploration Society was established in New York. Despite having been inspired by the work of the PEF¹⁷ and rooted in the 'biblical tradition' established a few decades earlier by the American architect Edward Robinson (1797-1863),¹⁸ it had already ceased to exist in 1878. Of the same period was the Deutsche Verein zur Erforschung Palastinas (DVEP), the exploratory fund established in 1878 by the newly born German Empire. The rising political rivalry between the German and British Empires was reflected in the tensions between the PEF and the DVEP. A comparison with Germany's approach to the region can throw much light on just how 'unusual' the *modus operandi* of the British establishment was. As far as the Germans were concerned, the Arabs, Jews, Turks, Afghans and Persians were simply a means to the achievement of a powerful German hegemony. Berlin's foreign policy was inspired by a genuine interest in preserving and strengthening an ideal – which subsequently proved fatal – known as

¹⁵ With his visit to the Holy Land, the Prince of Wales, who became king in 1902 with the name Edward VII (1841–1910), opened 'the whole of Syria to Christian research'. Quarterly Statement of the Palestine Exploration Fund [hereafter, QSPEF], v. I, London 1866, 2. A.P. Stanley (1815-1881), one of the founders of the PEF, was the Prince's guide.

¹⁶ A *Palestine Society* had already been founded in London at the beginning of the 1800s, which in some measure was the forerunner of the PEF. The *Jerusalem Water Relief Fund* (with Montefiore, Finn and Shaftesbury as members) and the *Jerusalem Literary Society* (founded in 1849 by Finn) supplied the determining impulses. On precursor societies to the PEF see C.R. Conder, H.H. Kitchener, *The Survey of Western Palestine*, v. I (London: PEF, 1881), 1-3.

¹⁷ The guidelines of the *American Palestine Exploration Society* were taken from those of the PEF, with the exception of a significant additional sentence: 'Its supreme importance – Joseph P. Thompson, the society president, specified – is for the illustration and defense of the Bible'. QSPEF, no. 1, (1871) 34-35.

¹⁸ See E. Robinson, *Biblical Researches in Palestine, Mount Sinai and Arabia Petrea* (Boston: Crocker, 1841).

Deutschtum or ‘German-ness’. German policy in the East was generally not inspired by the references to the Old Testament that largely motivated Britain. Furthermore, as noted by Abdul-Latif Tibawi (1910–1981), the work of the DVEP, as well as that of the French *Ecole Biblique* of the Dominican Order in Jerusalem and other institutions of different national affiliation belongs to a large extent ‘to the twentieth, not the nineteenth century’.¹⁹

Among its founders, the PEF counted prominent evangelists such as George Grove (1820-1900) and Lord Shaftesbury (1801-1885);²⁰ and well-known imperialists like Walter Morrison (1836-1921).²¹ It should not be surprising therefore that both aspects – evangelical and imperial – were present in the words spoken by the archbishop of York, William Thompson (1819-1890), in the opening speech that hailed the creation of the PEF: ‘This country of Palestine belongs to *you* and to *me*. It is essentially ours. It was given to the Father of Israel in the words: ‘Walk the land in the length of it and in the breadth of it, for I will give it unto thee’. *We* mean to walk through Palestine in the length and in the breadth of it because that land has been given unto us. ... It is the land towards which we turn as the fountain of all our hopes; it is the land to which we may look with as true a patriotism as we do to this dear old England, which we love so much’.²²

Despite these declarations, as well as the prayer officiated for the occasion by the bishop of London, the scientific purposes of the PEF were promptly laid out in its statute. It was Thompson’s task to read the founding prospectus of the PEF: ‘Our object is strictly an inductive inquiry. We are not to be a religious society; we are not about to launch controversy; we are about to apply the rules of science’.²³ In other words, the evangelical extremism connected to the prophecies that characterized the previous decades and centuries should have ultimately left room for attempts to historicize the holy scripture, in order to cast a ‘newer and a truer light on the Bible’.²⁴

Nevertheless, the line between imperialism, religious fanaticism and the scientific method blurred. When, in the second half of the 1860s, Charles William Wilson (1836-1905)²⁵ and other members of the PEF arrived in Palestine to conduct the first modern archaeological and topographical investigations, their purpose was to provide ‘the most definite and solid aid obtainable for the elucidation of the most prominent of the material features of the Bible’.²⁶ More specifically, their interest was not in the sites connected to the New Testament, but rather in those cited in the Jewish Bible (the Old Testament). This choice was attributed to the fact that the places cited in the New Testament – more precisely the ones

¹⁹ A.L. Tibawi, *British interests in Palestine, 1800-1901* (London: Oxford UP, 1961), 205.

²⁰ Shaftesbury in his inaugural address as president of the PEF: ‘Let us not delay ... to send out the best agents ... to search the length and breadth of Palestine, to survey the land, and if possible to go over every corner of it, drain it, measure it, and, if you will, prepare it for the return of its ancient possessors, for I must believe that the time cannot be far off before that great event will come to pass’.

²¹ *The National Review* reported on the occasion of Morrison’s death that he ‘believed intensely in the future of the British race and Empire’. *The National Review*, v. 78, 1921, 857.

²² PEF/MINS, 22 June 1865. Thompson served as president of the PEF from 1865 to 1890.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ C.R. Conder, *The Future of Palestine: A Lecture* (London: PEF, 1892), 35.

²⁵ On 25 September 1865 the president of the PEF (E. Ebor) asked the Marquis of Ripon (1827-1909), Secretary of State for the War at the time, permission to give Wilson the task of investigating ‘the Holy Land in a more accurate and systematic manner than has yet been done’. The National Archives [hereafter TNA] OS [Ordinance survey] 1/17/1. The year before (1864) Wilson was in Jerusalem working on a project to improve the water system of the city. He took this opportunity to produce some impressive maps. Regarding Muslims in Jerusalem, Wilson wrote that they ‘belong for the most part to the same race as the peasantry of Palestine, representatives it may be, though with a large intermixture of foreign blood, of the Jebusite that dwelt in the land’. C. Wilson, *Jerusalem, the Holy City* (Jerusalem: Ariel, 1974), 118.

²⁶ QSPEF, London 1875, 3.

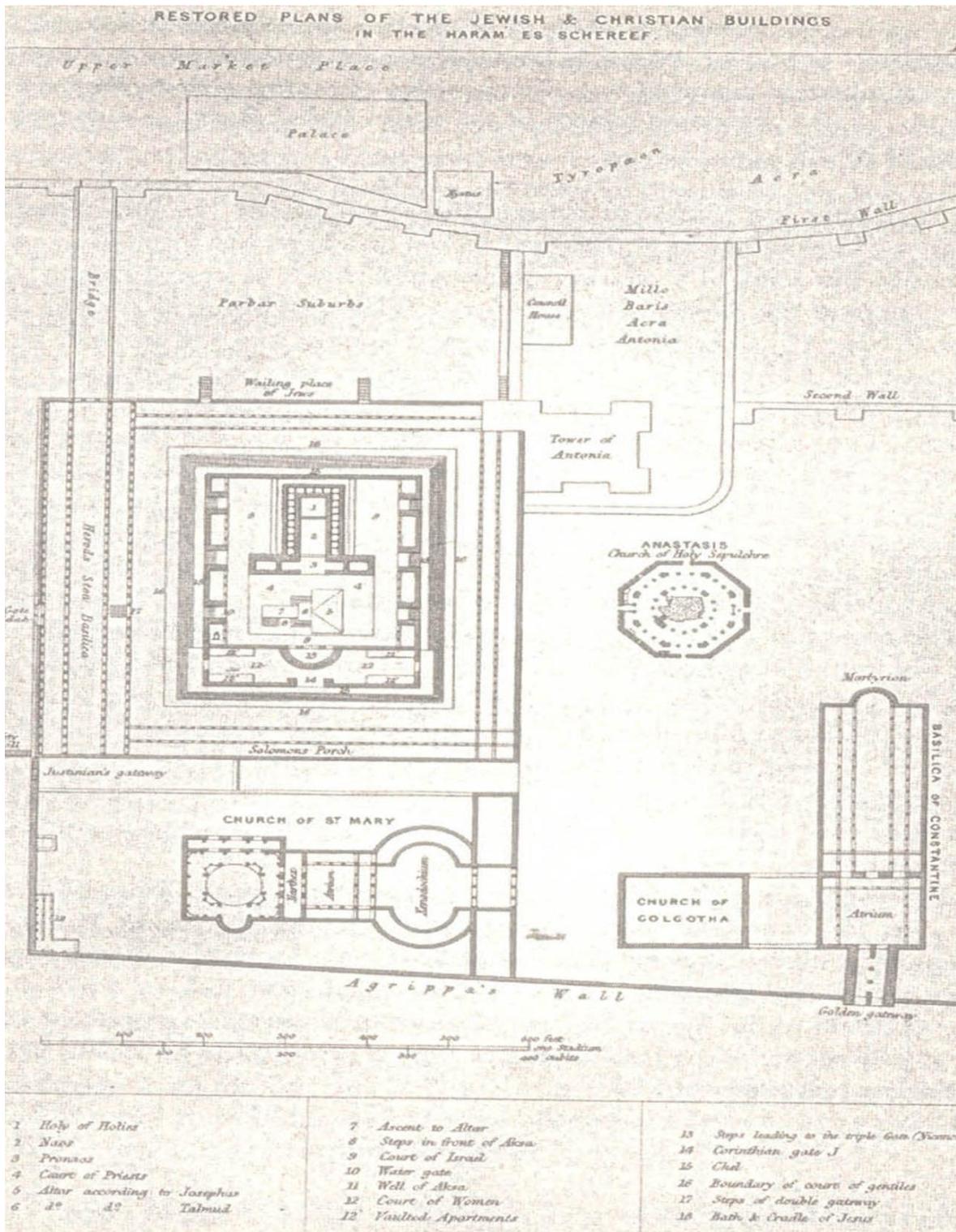


Figure 3: James Fergusson (1808–1886) argued in his *Ancient Topography of Jerusalem* dated 1847 that the original site of the burial of Christ was not the Holy Sepulcher, but rather the place where the Dome of the Rock is located. This thesis followed those presented in previous decades by Edward Daniel Clarke (1769–1822) and Edward Robinson. Fergusson proposed the map reproduced above as a project guide to reinstate holy Jewish and Christian places over that which in the Islamic world is known as al-haram al-qudsī al-sharīf (Noble Sanctuary). Some respected sources report that Fergusson’s theories ‘are said to have been the origin of the establishment of the Palestine Exploration Fund’. H. Chisholm (ed.), *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1910), v. X, no. XI, 273.

known at the time – were already under the direct control of the Orthodox Christians, as well as of the Catholics and other non-Protestant denominations. Even more importantly, this was traceable to the desire to connect Anglican Protestantism to the ancient Israelites and thus to the concept of ‘chosen people’. As had already happened with Gildas (c.500–570),²⁷ the purpose was clear: to create a parallelism in order to show how ‘the Chosen People of old, the Israelites, had been succeeded by the New Chosen People, the English’.²⁸

Beside these considerations, however, there was a second side to the PEF. These operations reflected military strategies camouflaged by archaeological interests – many PEF’s members were connected to the British establishment, not to mention the fact that Queen Victoria became its patron as well as financier – in order to obtain strategic information and progressively entrench the British presence in Palestine. The maps produced by the PEF, created with an accuracy (scale 1:63 360) unknown before that time, were more useful than ever for Her Majesty’s intelligence for the defense of the Suez Canal in case of new friction with Russia. ‘The power that holds the “Promised Land”’, a flier produced by the PEF in 1880 stated, ‘holds the two routes from East to West’.²⁹ Those same maps were also used later, in 1917/18, during the conquest of Palestine by General Allenby’s troops.³⁰

Maps produced prior to the 19th century were little more than notes based on suggestions passed down over the centuries. In the first half of the 19th century various Western cartographers visited the region to create rudimentary maps for military purposes. Though not complete and containing macroscopic errors, these maps served as the basis for PEF works. This is the case, in fact, of the maps produced in 1810 by Seetzen and in 1815 by Pierre Jacotin, a geographer who had participated in Napoleon’s Egyptian campaign, followed by those by Gauthier (1822), Assheton (1822), Berghaus (1835), Catherwood (1833), Scott (1844), van de Welde (1854–62) and others.³¹

The interpretation of the meaning and of the history of Palestine that was revealed by the works of the PEF, which were often imbued with a ‘triumphant sense of European superiority’,³² was quickly transformed into a tool for the legitimization of British political claims on the Holy Land. The success of this legitimization was facilitated by the longstanding weakness and disorganization showed in the region by the Porte; it would be enough to mention that the latter, at the start of World War I, still continued to identify the distances between various areas of Palestine in terms of hours of travel.³³ Furthermore, this

²⁷ *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae* is the title of the most ancient manuscript which has survived until today that was composed by a British author on the history of Albion. It was edited around 564 A.D. by Gildas, a 44-year-old Welsh cleric, known for being the most ancient source for Britain’s post-Roman history. Britain, though it was not home to any Jewish communities, was referred to in the manuscript as ‘the new Israel’, and that battles of this ‘holy nation’ (*goy kadosh*: Exodus 19:6) against ‘barbarian invaders’ equaled the battles of ancient Israel against the Babylonians and Philistines. BLMC – HP – MS. 522, *Gildas’ Chronicle 1525*, 76. Two centuries later, in 731, Venerable Bede (672c.–735) wrote the *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*. Here some themes in Gildas’s work were repeated, such as the perception of being ‘God’s chosen people’ and ‘the new Israel’. Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation*, Cosimo, New York 2007.

²⁸ J.J. Moscrop, *Measuring Jerusalem: the Palestine Exploration Fund and British interests in the Holy Land*, New York: Leicester UP, 2000).

²⁹ PEF, *Twelve Reasons for Subscribing*, 4, cited in Moscrop, *Measuring*, 219.

³⁰ N. Asher Silberman, *Digging for God and Country* (New York: Knopf, 1982, 193). The author ended the book highlighting that ‘to possess the Land of the Bible is to interpret its history’. *Ibid.*, 202.

³¹ About the contribution of these pioneers see C. Ritter, *The Comparative Geography of Palestine and the Sinaitic Peninsula*, (New York: Haskell, 1865, v. II, 78–86).

³² B. Schaebler, ‘Practicing Musha’: Common Lands and the Common Good in Southern Syria under the Ottomans and the French’, in R. Owen (ed.), *New Perspectives on Property and Land in the Middle East* (Cambridge: Harvard Middle Eastern Monographs, 2000), 249.

³³ Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi [hereafter, BOA] DH.ID. 59/72. 20 May. 1914. The document, which included the distances in travel hours, was written at the conclusion of a tour made by the governor Ahmed Mecid in the Jerusalem area.

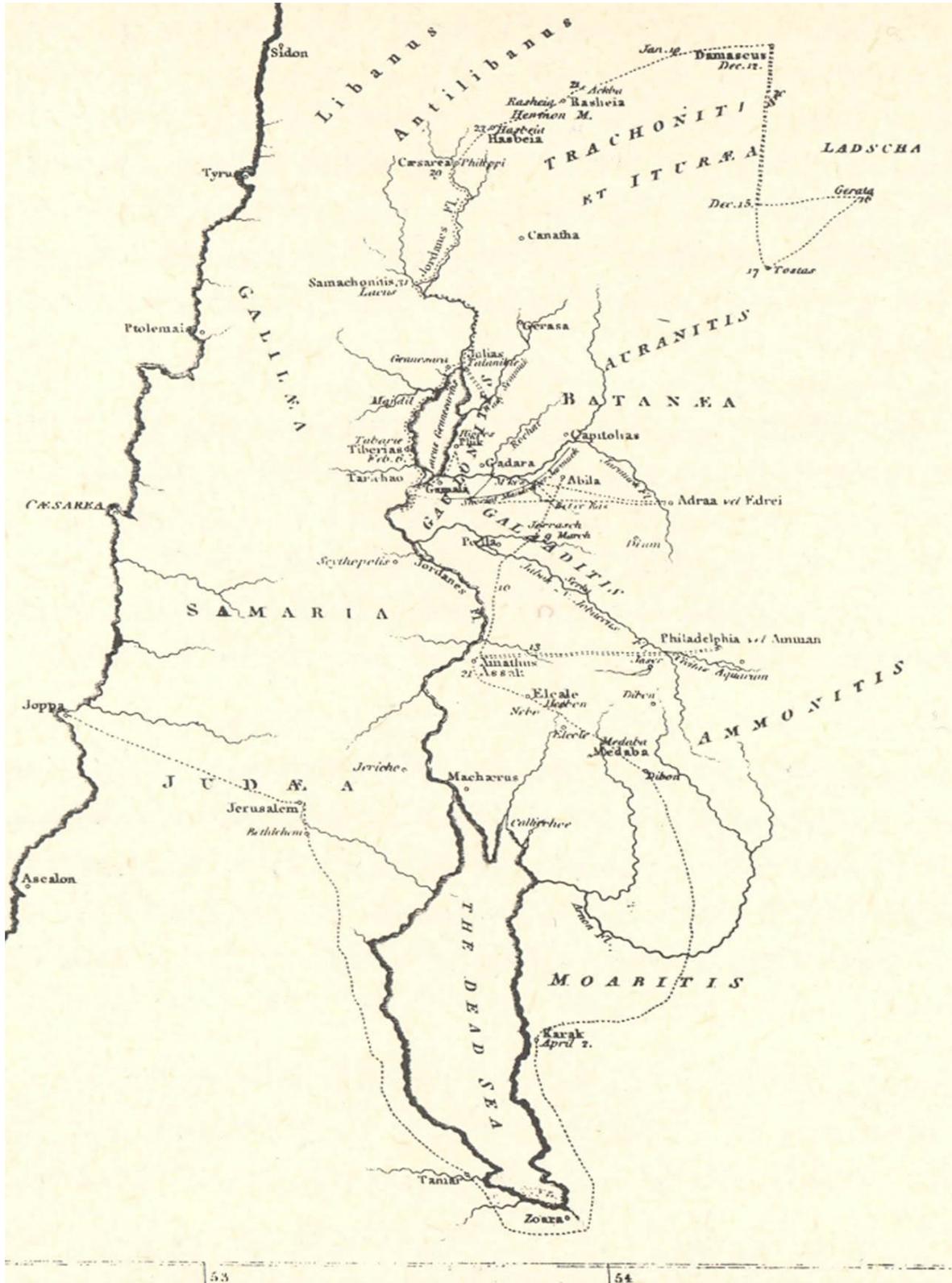


Figure 4: Map created by Seetzen in 1805-06. U.J. Seetzen, *A Brief Account of the Countries Adjoining the Lake of Tiberias, the Jordan, and the Dead Sea* (Bath: Palestine Association of London, 1810).

was facilitated by the certainty that the presence of Muslims in Palestine was a ‘temporary degeneration’; the true significance of the Holy Land, as clearly expressed by two key figures of the PEF, Charles Warren (1840–1927)³⁴ and Claude R. Conder (1848-1910),³⁵ was to be found in its Christian and Jewish inhabitants. This predisposition was expressed in various forms in numerous documents. In one of the volumes of *The Surveys of Western Palestine* there is for example a section entitled ‘The peasantry of Western Palestine’. The words written by Charles F. Tyrwhitt-Drake (1846-1847), who from 1869 until his death held prominent positions in the PEF,³⁶ show a predisposition towards the local population – specifically the *fellāhīn* – which went well beyond mere intolerance:

The physical and mental degradation of the women, who are mere animals, proletaires, beasts of burden, cannot but have a most injurious effect upon the children ... the fellaheen are, all in all, the worst type of humanity that I have come across in the East ...] the fellah is totally destitute of all moral sense.³⁷

But it was perhaps Thomas Edward Lawrence (‘Lawrence of Arabia’, 1888-1935), a leading figure in the PEF as well as a protagonist of the Arab Revolt of 1916-18, who most clearly expressed the prevalent opinion among the members of the organization in relation to the local Arab populations. Though belonging to the generation following that of Tyrwhitt-Drake and that of the PEF founders, Lawrence captured in his *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* a feeling that was widespread even in the last quarter of the 19th century:

The Semites [Lawrence was referring to Arabic speakers] have no middle ground of seeing things ... they don’t understand our metaphysical problems, our introspective questions. They only understand true and false, faith and no faith, without our hesitating result of subtle nuances ... They were limited people of limited vision, whose inert intellect remains arid in careless resignation. Their imaginations were vivid, but not creative. There was so little Arab art in Asia that one could almost say that there was no art whatsoever ... They didn’t invent any philosophical system, no complex mythology.³⁸

The approach taken towards the Islamic component in Palestine wavered, therefore, between disinterest and disdain, with the result of raising hostility among the natives shortly after. Various influential members of the PEF – among them Conder³⁹ and Lord Kitchener (1850-

³⁴ Warren openly proposed British colonization of Palestine: ‘Let this be done with the avowed intention of gradually introducing the Jew, pure and simple, who is eventually to occupy and govern this country’. C. Warren, *The Land of Promise: or, Turkey’s Guarantee* (London: Bell, 1875), 14-20. The timeline proposed by Warren and Conder regarding the city of Jerusalem started in 1044 B.C., the year in which the Holy City – founded by the Jebusites around two thousand years before – was conquered by King David. C. Warren, C.R. Conder, *The Survey of Western Palestine* (London: PEF, 1884), 1.

³⁵ ‘The Moslem peasantry, whose fanaticism is slowly dying out, coming under such influences [of Jews and Christians] will gradually become more intelligent and more active, but will cease to be the masters of the country; and as European capital and European colonists increase in the country, it will come more and more into the circle of those states, which are growing up out of the body of the Turk’. C.R. Conder, *The Future of Palestine: A Lecture Delivered for the Palestine Exploration Fund* (London: PEF, 1892), 34.

³⁶ In 1872 Tyrwhitt-Drake briefly took over the direction of topographic measurements carried out on site by the PEF. In that historical period, from 1870, the PEF concentrated almost exclusively on the mapping of Palestine.

³⁷ C.F. Tyrwhitt Drake, ‘The fellaheen’, in The Committee of the PEF, *The Surveys of Western Palestine. Special Papers on Topography, Archaeology, Manners and Customs* (London: PEF, 1881), 310-311. A few pages later, Elizabeth Finn, also active in the PEF, wrote that among local farmers ‘to lie is considered a very great and useful accomplishment’. What is more, she noted that ‘one quarter of the town of Bethlehem ... was known as a perfect nest of robbers’. *Ibid.*, 355-356.

³⁸ T. E. Lawrence, *Seven pillars of wisdom* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), 36-37.

³⁹ Conder was more cautious when judging the local population, but only to contradict himself immediately after: ‘We cannot generalise about them, any more than we can generalise at home. The average standard is very low as regards morality, truth, and intellect’. C.R. Conder, *Palestine* (London: Philip, 1889), 232.



Figure 6: Tyrwhitt-Drake lingered on the 'mental degradation of the women, who are mere animals, proletaires, beasts of burden [...]'. The image above portrays a woman of Nazareth at the end of the nineteenth century. Produced by Underwood & Underwood (London and New York), Special Collections, Central Library of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

1916), two old friends brought together by a strong religious devotion – were victims of 'unjustified assaults' by some local inhabitants to the yell 'death to Christians'.⁴⁰ Though not justifiable, this bitterness was at least partially explicable given the hostility – on sporadic occasions aggravated by cases of physical abuse⁴¹ – shown to them by various Western engineers, geographers and painters,⁴² as well as Protestant missionaries. The local population had difficulty in differentiating the, albeit limited, scientific-religious activities of the PEF from those of the missionaries across the whole of the region. It is not surprising then that, as witnessed in 1860 by Consul Finn from Jerusalem, the Arab farmers in Palestine were deemed to be 'unsettled in mind, being apprehensive of a general inundation of all sorts of European Christians, including Spanish, Sardinian, Prussians, and Greeks'.⁴³

Apart from such implications connected to the contingencies of the moment, the work of the PEF is important in light of its long term consequences. Its maps, supported in those years by the 'Biblical Orientalism' of George Adam Smith (1856-1942),⁴⁴ instilled 'the imaginary perception of Palestine based on the Bible' to which this article's introduction

⁴⁰ The communication sent on 14 July 1875 by Conder to the General British Consul to Beirut: 'I have to request your interference in an exceedingly serious case of murderous and unjustified assault on my party by the Moslem inhabitants of Safed ... before I spoke a single word the Sheikh seized me violently by the throat in defence I struck him in the face with my fist and knocked him down ...'. TNA FO 195/1067.

⁴¹ Regarding some laborers working in the ruins of Jerusalem, Warren wrote that he had hit them 'to make them work harder'. C. Warren, *Underground Jerusalem* (London: Bentley, 1876), 6.

⁴² The depiction of the Holy Land is a phenomenon of Western tradition: 'Muslims and Jews took little part in portraying the land ... Representations of the human figure, animals, places, and events ran counter to the religion and culture of Islam'. Y. Ben-Arieh, 'Biblical Landscapes Through Western eyes', in H. Brodsky (ed.), *Land and Community: Geography in Jewish Studies* (Baltimore: Univ. Press of Maryland, 1997), 9.

⁴³ TNA FO 226/147. Finn to Moore. Jerusalem, 14 Aug. 1860.

⁴⁴ Smith, instructor of Exegesis of the Old Testament in Glasgow and then in Aberdeen, visited Palestine four times: the first one in 1880. He wrote a book about it, which was reprinted in 26 editions, and was read by



Figure 7: The first logo of the PEF; the image shows the methods used at that time to map: the theodolite and topographic triangulation. C.R. Conder, *Tent Work in Palestine* (London: Bentley, 1878), v. I.

referred. The repercussions of this phenomenon were amplified by an initiative that began in 1869, the year in which the PEF printed the first volume of the *Palestine Exploration Fund Quarterly Statement*, responsible for divulging their findings. In these months – the same in which the Suez Canal was opened – the inventor of modern travel agencies Thomas Cook (1808-1892) inaugurated ‘evangelical tourism’, leading the first touristic journey to Jerusalem. Just fifty-one people participated in that tour, but over the following three decades twelve thousand British pilgrims – mainly belonging to the middle-class – followed in their footsteps. Through this undertaking, Cook – raised with a strict Baptist upbringing (he became a Baptist minister in 1828) – contributed perhaps more than anyone else ‘to facilitate and shape evangelical contact with the Holy Land’.⁴⁵ Thanks to him, the considerations expressed by Archbishop Thompson in the inaugural meeting of the PEF (‘This country of

General Allenby (1861-1936) and his soldiers during the conquest of Palestine in 1917. The six maps in it, integrated in 1915 to form an entire atlas on the theme, were edited by the ‘prince of cartography’ John George Bartholomew (1860-1920), who, like the author, read the Palestinian reality through ‘biblical lenses’. Smith, moreover, gave light to many parallelisms between England, Scotland and the biblical lands: ‘Like England, Judaea, though not impregnable, has all the advantages of insularity’. G.A. Smith, *The Historical Geography of the Holy Land*, (London: Hodder, 1928), 297. Whitelam described Smith’s book as a ‘classic Orientalist expression of Europe’s other’. K.W. Whitelam, *The Invention of Ancient Israel: The Silencing of Palestinian History* (London: Routledge, 1996), 42. See also I.D. Campbell, “In search of the Physical: George Adam Smith’s Journeys to Palestine and Their Importance,” *History and Anthropology*, v. 13, no. 4 (2002), 291-299.

⁴⁵ S. Sizer, *Christian Zionism: Road Map to Armageddon?* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 2004), 34.

Palestine belongs to *you* and to *me*'⁴⁶ were not conveyed through books and maps, but rather through the direct experience of men and women of Great Britain. These are the words Cook used in 1872 to describe the efforts made by his organization:

The educational and social results of these four years of Eastern travel have been most encouraging. A new incentive to scriptural investigation has been created and fostered; "The Land and the Book" have been brought into familiar juxtaposition, and their analogies have been better comprehended; and under the general influence of sacred scenes and repeated sites of biblical events, inquiring and believing spirits have held sweet counsel with each other.⁴⁷

Cook's approach, like the maps produced by the PEF, had the effect of crystallizing the connections between Biblical events and the physical characteristics of Palestine. These connections spread, among other things, the idea that names used by Arabs of Palestine to refer to millenary cities such as, for example, 'Ariha (*Arīhā* in Arabic, *Yeriho* in Hebrew), 'Asqalana (*Asqalān* in Arabic, *Ashqelon* in Hebrew), 'Akka (*Akkā* in Arabic, 'Akko in Hebrew), Gaza (*Ghazza* in Arabic, 'Azza in Hebrew), were nothing but awkward attempts to distort, 'arabize' and 'bastardize' the names of ancient Israeli cities. This was a perception that, although often unfounded, has had repercussions visible to the present day.

Conclusion

'Biblical Orientalism' reverberates until today. It can be found in the neo-evangelical movements' impact on the foreign policy of the most important power in the region (the United States) and it can be detected in more subtle ways, as for example in the path dependency of the maps which we use in reference to the area. Biblical Orientalism was already present in the maps published in the first modern atlas by Dutch cartographer Abraham Ortelius (1527-1598). In the 16th century Ortelius instilled 'black on white' the idea of a 'meta-Palestine' devoid of any history except that of Biblical gloriousness. It is, however, only in the second half of the 19th century when 'Biblical Orientalism' reached its climax that this approach found its ideal ground. It is then that the 'shadowing' process in relation to the local populations, as well as the impression that the history of the major villages and cities in the region had its point zero in Biblical times, gained their most influential formulations.

Speaking about the Arabic names of the local cities, the geographer David Benvenisti (1897-1993) made a reference to the 'bastardizations of the authentic Hebrew ones, an aberration of sorts, which was rectified with their liberation'.⁴⁸ These kinds of simplifications are still today repeated almost verbatim in many academic publications, journals, and newspapers.⁴⁹ The attempts to appropriate in an exclusivist way of thousands of years of

⁴⁶ In 1869 the archbishop of York, William Thompson, pointed out the following to the PEF: 'We look on Jerusalem now – we English people – as a city that in some measure belongs to us. Do we not every year pour forth in thousands the documents that attests its history – do we not put forth in thousands and tens of thousands that sacred Book wherein is written its rise and its fortunes and its fall? May we not naturally say, when we are so largely occupied in spreading its history, that we have in some measure made it our own?'. QSPEF, v. I, London 1869, 91.

⁴⁷ *Cook's Excursionist*, 5 Aug. 1872, 2.

⁴⁸ In M. Benvenisti, *Son of the Cypresses* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 31.

⁴⁹ Ashkelon, - mentioned in the Egyptian Execration texts of the 19th century BCE as well as in the Amarna Letters of the 15th century BCE as "Asqalanu" - Bethlehem, - quoted in the Amarna Letters as 'Bit-Lahmi' - Acre, - cited in the Amarna Letters as "Akka" - and several other cities, can trace their origins and names to a past much more remote than Biblical times; it is to this ancient past that the Arabs of Palestine have often turned for the names of the cities they populate. This is confirmed by the fact that the Arabic names of the cities

local history, perpetuated in each of these works, have been vital in igniting the many absolutist theories which are thriving in our days. It is necessary, perhaps now more than ever, to instill (or re-instill) the concept of continuity in reference to the history of the region. This is not a way to deny the claims of any of its peoples, but instead is a path aiming at showing why a land that did not belong to one single people in its entire history cannot be but shared.

‘If I wish to profit by this tour’, Mark Twain (1835-1910) noted during his stay in the Holy Land, ‘and come to a correct understanding of the matters of interest connected to it, I must studiously and faithfully unlearn a great many things I have somehow absorbed concerning Palestine’.⁵⁰ *The Innocents Abroad*, the book in which he wrote these words, has been one of the most widely read travel diaries of all time. Twain’s message, often misunderstood, is today more valid than ever: it is necessary to unlearn in order to relearn, to deconstruct in order to reconstruct. The road that leads to a broader comprehension of the current Israeli-Palestinian tragedy – and with it to a deeper empathy for all its victims – cannot avoid these aspects. Such awareness will help to create the conditions for a more respectful coexistence: a coexistence that will pay proper attention to the process through which the local universe has been essentialised and denied in its continuity.

mentioned in this text, as well as of dozens of other symbolic places such as Majiddu (Megiddo) or the Naqab (Negev) Desert, are much more similar to the original names found in four thousand years old Egyptian hieroglyphics, as well as in the Amarna Letters, than to the place names used in Western languages, or in Hebrew. The names of the cities that have been adapted to Arabic were almost exclusively of foreign origins (as for example in the case of Nablus, from the Roman ‘Neapolis’). As for Jerusalem, a name of Canaanite origins formed by the prefix ‘Uru’ (‘founded by’) and ‘Shalem’ (a Canaanite God), it is mentioned in the Egyptian Execration texts and was probably pronounced as ‘Rushalimum’, possibly a corruption of the Akkadian ‘Uru Shalimim’. The fact that Arabs, and more in general Muslims, referred to the city with the appellation of Al-Quds (‘The Holy’), instead of a toponym closer to the ancient Uru-Shalem, was perhaps due to the will to mark a clear distinction from the name of Canaanite derivation adopted by Jews: ‘Yerushalayim’.

⁵⁰ M. Twain, *The Innocents Abroad* (New York: Penguin, 2002), 363.