

Whose Land, And Whose History, Is It Anyway

The Jewish connection to Israel – and Jerusalem – spans millennia and cannot be overlooked. But then, what about the Native Americans and the Aboriginal community of Australia?

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Ask the most vociferous supporters of the Palestinian cause and they will tell you that Israel is a coloniser, one that deprived Palestinians of their lands. They argue that the region had been under Ottoman rule until World War I and that Jews were thrust upon Muslim lands by an unfair Balfour Declaration of 1917 that envisioned “a national home for the Jewish people”.

But if we assume the coloniser’s contention to be true, then we must also ask who ruled before the Ottomans. Christian Crusaders had captured Jerusalem in 1099 and Saladin had recaptured the city for the Muslims in 1187. Alternating periods of Christian and Muslim control recurred until Ottoman Sultan Selim I took over in 1517. For the next 400 years, this region remained part of an administrative unit called Ottoman Syria with a population that contained Muslims, Christians, and Jews.

It is true that from the late 1800s there was a steady inflow of Jews from Eastern Europe and Russia. So yes, Jewish presence did increase. Often overlooked is the fact that there was also an inflow of Arabs from Egypt and Syria to work on infrastructure projects. After World War II, there were new waves of Jewish arrivals from Germany and Austria.

The UN partitioned the region into separate Jewish and Arab states, along with an internationally administered Jerusalem. The Jews accepted this solution, but the Arabs rejected it. As soon as Israel was born, it was attacked by Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, and Lebanon. Ironically, the war helped Israel consolidate territory, but thousands of Palestinians were displaced. Again, what is forgotten is that several thousand Jews were evicted from Arab lands such as Yemen and Iraq and thus forced to settle in Israel.

In the Jewish psyche, they were just returning

home. According to the Book of Genesis, there was a covenant between God and Abraham (around 2000 BCE) in which God promised to bequeath to his descendants the land of Canaan (roughly today’s Israel, the Palestinian territories, Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan). In that sense, Jews were the original inhabitants for 4000 years, not merely 400. The name Jerusalem occurs several hundred times in the Old Testament.

The exile and return of Jews from this region had remained a recurring pattern throughout history. For



TANGLED PASTS: Dome of the Rock on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem

example, in the times of Abraham’s grandson Joseph, there was famine. Many moved to Egypt for work, but a new Egyptian pharaoh felt threatened by their presence and proceeded to enslave them. Moses – and his successor Joshua – eventually led the group back to their homeland, dividing the territory between twelve tribes.

By 1000 BCE, King David united the tribes and established Jerusalem as his capital. His son, Solomon, constructed the First Temple on the Temple Mount. When this temple was destroyed in 586 BCE by the Babylonians, many Jews were taken captive to Babylon (today’s Iraq). They were only freed decades later when Cyrus II, the Achaemenid king, defeated the Babylonians

and allowed the Second Temple to be built by returning Jews. Remember the lyrics of that 1978 hit by Boney-M? ‘By the Rivers of Babylon’ incorporated Psalm 137 of the Bible and expressed the anguish of the Jews at being separated from their home.

Next, the Jews came under the control of Hellenistic forces. When the Roman Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity in 312 CE, Christian holy sites were built in Jerusalem. When the Jews and the Christians were both crushed by the Rashidun Caliphate in 637 CE, the Temple Mount became the site of the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa Mosque. The Jews had yet again lost their holiest site, now only permitted to pray at the Western Wall.

One can’t help looking at this story through the lens of Kashmir. Kashmir was once a thriving Shaivite and Buddhist civilisation. We discuss the exodus of Kashmiri Pandits in the 1990s but forget that demographic changes started from the 14th century under Sikandar who imposed a complete prohibition on Hindu festivals, rituals, and traditions. Successive kings ensured the steady conversion or expulsion of Hindus until they became a minority. By 1947, the overwhelmingly altered population imbalance emboldened Pakistan to claim Kashmir. Should Kashmiri Hindus stay away because they are no longer the majority? Do they have no ancestral claim?

But then one may ask, do the Native Americans not pine for the lands that were stolen from them by European settlers? What about the Aboriginal community of Australia? Examples of displacement abound in Canada, South Africa, New Zealand, Latin America, and many other parts of the world. How many layers should we peel away to discover the “original” inhabitants? And what if the layer preceding the “original” is not part of the written historical record? There is no definitive answer, only more questions.

The writer is an author of several works of fiction