

Top Ten Reasons East Jerusalem Does Not Belong to Jewish-Israelis

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Global Research, March 26, 2010

[Informed Comment](#) 23 March 2010

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Israeli Prime Minister [Binyamin Netanyahu told the American Israel Public Affairs Council on Monday that “Jerusalem is not a settlement.”](#) He continued that the historical connection between the Jewish people and the land of Israel cannot be denied. He added that neither could the historical connection between the Jewish people and Jerusalem. He insisted, “The Jewish people were building Jerusalem 3,000 years ago and the Jewish people are building Jerusalem today.” He said, “Jerusalem is not a settlement. It is our capital.” He told his applauding audience of 7500 that he was simply following the policies of all Israeli governments since the 1967 conquest of Jerusalem in the Six Day War.

Netanyahu mixed together Romantic-nationalist cliches with a series of historically false assertions. But even more important was everything he left out of the history, and his citation of his warped and inaccurate history instead of considering laws, rights or common human decency toward others not of his ethnic group.

So here are the reasons that Netanyahu is profoundly wrong, and East Jerusalem does not belong to him.

1. In international law, East Jerusalem is occupied territory, as are the parts of the West Bank that Israel unilaterally annexed to its district of Jerusalem. The [Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949 and the Hague Regulations of 1907 forbid occupying powers to alter the lifeways of civilians who are occupied](#), and forbid the settling of people from the occupiers’ country in the occupied territory. Israel’s expulsion of Palestinians from their homes in East Jerusalem, its usurpation of Palestinian property there, and its settling of Israelis on Palestinian land are all gross violations of international law. Israeli claims that they are not occupying Palestinians because the Palestinians have no state are cruel and tautological. Israeli claims that they are building on empty territory are laughable. My back yard is empty, but that does not give Netanyahu the right to put up an apartment complex on it.

2. Israeli governments have not in fact been united or consistent about what to do with East Jerusalem and the West Bank, contrary to what Netanyahu says. The Galili Plan for settlements in the West Bank was adopted only in 1973. Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin gave undertakings as part of the Oslo Peace Process to withdraw from Palestinian territory and grant Palestinians a state, promises for which he was assassinated by the Israeli far right (elements of which are now supporting Netanyahu’s government). As late as 2000, then Prime Minister Ehud Barak claims that he gave oral assurances that Palestinians could have almost all of the West Bank and could have some arrangement by which East Jerusalem could be its capital. Netanyahu tried to give the impression that far rightwing Likud policy on East Jerusalem and the West Bank has been shared by all previous Israeli governments, but

this is simply not true.

3. Romantic nationalism imagines a “people” as eternal and as having an eternal connection with a specific piece of land. This way of thinking is fantastic and mythological. Peoples are formed and change and sometimes cease to be, though they might have descendants who abandoned that religion or ethnicity or language. Human beings have moved all around and are not directly tied to any territory in an exclusive way, since many groups have lived on most pieces of land. Jerusalem was not founded by Jews, i.e. adherents of the Jewish religion. It was founded between 3000 BCE and 2600 BCE by a West Semitic people or possibly the Canaanites, the common ancestors of Palestinians, Lebanese, many Syrians and Jordanians, and many Jews. But when it was founded Jews did not exist.

4. Jerusalem was founded in honor of the ancient god Shalem. It does not mean City of Peace but rather ‘built-up place of Shalem.’”

5. The “Jewish people” were not building Jerusalem 3000 years ago, i.e. 1000 BCE. First of all, it is not clear when exactly Judaism as a religion centered on the worship of the one God took firm form. It appears to have been a late development since no evidence of worship of anything but ordinary Canaanite deities has been found in archeological sites through 1000 BCE. There was no invasion of geographical Palestine from Egypt by former slaves in the 1200s BCE. The pyramids had been built much earlier and had not used slave labor. The chronicle of the events of the reign of Ramses II on the wall in Luxor does not know about any major slave revolts or flights by same into the Sinai peninsula. Egyptian sources never heard of Moses or the 12 plagues & etc. Jews and Judaism emerged from a certain social class of Canaanites over a period of centuries inside Palestine.

6. Jerusalem not only was not being built by the likely then non-existent “Jewish people” in 1000 BCE, but Jerusalem probably was not even inhabited at that point in history. [Jerusalem appears to have been abandoned between 1000 BCE and 900 BCE, the traditional dates for the united kingdom under David and Solomon.](#) So Jerusalem was not ‘the city of David,’ since there was no city when he is said to have lived. No sign of magnificent palaces or great states has been found in the archeology of this period, and the Assyrian tablets, which recorded even minor events throughout the Middle East, such as the actions of Arab queens, don’t know about any great kingdom of David and Solomon in geographical Palestine.

7. Since archeology does not show the existence of a Jewish kingdom or kingdoms in the so-called First Temple Period, it is not clear when exactly the Jewish people would have ruled Jerusalem except for the Hasmonean Kingdom. The Assyrians conquered Jerusalem in 722. The Babylonians took it in 597 and ruled it until they were themselves conquered in 539 BCE by the Achaemenids of ancient Iran, who ruled Jerusalem until Alexander the Great took the Levant in the 330s BCE. Alexander’s descendants, the Ptolemies ruled Jerusalem until 198 when Alexander’s other descendants, the Seleucids, took the city. With the Maccabean Revolt in 168 BCE, the Jewish Hasmonean kingdom did rule Jerusalem until 37 BCE, though Antigonus II Mattathias, the last Hasmonean, only took over Jerusalem with the help of the Parthian dynasty in 40 BCE. Herod ruled 37 BCE until the Romans conquered what they called Palestine in 6 CE (CE= ‘Common Era’ or what Christians call AD). The Romans and then the Eastern Roman Empire of Byzantium ruled Jerusalem from 6 CE until 614 CE when the Iranian Sasanian Empire Conquered it, ruling until 629 CE when the Byzantines took it back.

The Muslims conquered Jerusalem in 638 and ruled it until 1099 when the Crusaders conquered it. The Crusaders killed or expelled Jews and Muslims from the city. The Muslims under Saladin took it back in 1187 CE and allowed Jews to return, and Muslims ruled it until the end of World War I, or altogether for about 1192 years.

Adherents of Judaism did not found Jerusalem. It existed for perhaps 2700 years before anything we might recognize as Judaism arose. Jewish rule may have been no longer than 170 years or so, i.e., the kingdom of the Hasmoneans.

8. Therefore if historical building of Jerusalem and historical connection with Jerusalem establishes sovereignty over it as Netanyahu claims, here are the groups that have the greatest claim to the city:

A. The Muslims, who ruled it and built it over 1191 years.

B. The Egyptians, who ruled it as a vassal state for several hundred years in the second millennium BCE.

C. The Italians, who ruled it about 444 years until the fall of the Roman Empire in 450 CE.

D. The Iranians, who ruled it for 205 years under the Achaemenids, for three years under the Parthians (insofar as the last Hasmonean was actually their vassal), and for 15 years under the Sasanids.

E. The Greeks, who ruled it for over 160 years if we count the Ptolemys and Seleucids as Greek. If we count them as Egyptians and Syrians, that would increase the Egyptian claim and introduce a Syrian one.

F. The successor states to the Byzantines, which could be either Greece or Turkey, who ruled it 188 years, though if we consider the heir to be Greece and add in the time the Hellenistic Greek dynasties ruled it, that would give Greece nearly 350 years as ruler of Jerusalem.

G. There is an Iraqi claim to Jerusalem based on the Assyrian and Babylonian conquests, as well as perhaps the rule of the Ayyubids (Saladin's dynasty), who were Kurds from Iraq.

9. Of course, Jews are historically connected to Jerusalem by the Temple, whenever that connection is dated to. But that link mostly was pursued when Jews were not in political control of the city, under Iranian, Greek and Roman rule. It cannot therefore be deployed to make a demand for political control of the whole city.

10. The Jews of Jerusalem and the rest of Palestine did not for the most part leave after the failure of the Bar Kochba revolt against the Romans in 136 CE. They continued to live there and to farm in Palestine under Roman rule and then Byzantine. They gradually converted to Christianity. After 638 CE all but 10 percent gradually converted to Islam. The present-day Palestinians are the descendants of the ancient Jews and have every right to live where their ancestors have lived for centuries.

Note

The sources are in the hyperlinks, especially the Thompson edited volume. See also Shlomo Sands recent book.

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