

Thousands of Years of Nation-building?

Ancient Arguments for Sovereignty in Bosnia and Israel/Palestine

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Sovereignty is not only a technical matter of international law, though it largely depends on external actors. Others outside a state have to accept the claim of sovereignty, otherwise it is worthless. There is a domestic dimension of sovereignty, however, which involves the question of its *internal legitimacy*. The notion of sovereignty and the desire for it can be firmly rooted in the state's population or the so-called nation. For example, the demand has been quite feeble among Bosnian Muslims (Bosnjaks) after the collapse of Tito-Yugoslavia, at least relatively weaker than the competing ethno-national projects of Serbia and Croatia. In addition, it is a quite new phenomenon with the Bosnjaks and has been continuously challenged by its neighbours and the outside world.

The notion of internal legitimacy of sovereignty plays an important role for the ethno-national political elite when pursuing their political ideal of a nation-state, particularly if this goal is challenged by external actors on the international level. It provides them with arguments for their political programme. Especially after the end of the Cold War and the melting of frozen political structures, the desire of perceived ethno-nations for statehood has picked up speed. There was not always a mass movement behind this endeavour. Therefore, a "national" historiography has become ever more important.

But why is sovereignty such a big issue in the first place? The main reason is that world politics works according to three basic assumptions: (1) States are the dominant and sovereign actors in the so-called *international* relations; (2) states hold the monopoly of power; and (3) conflicts and interventions are fought and settled on state levels.¹ Against this background, Sulzbach once shaped his minimum definition of a nation: "A 'nation' is... a group of people who demand a state because of its sovereignty vis-à-vis other states."² State sovereignty is the highest goal; sometimes the ideological motivation is even secondary.

Mayall and Simpson put it this way: "The state is often a valued prize in the competition between opposing ethnic and/or religious groups. The winners gain monopoly access to the outside world and the ability, therefore, to extract a rent from foreign governments, or private investors, during the process of modernization. [...] In other words, both the heterogeneous nature of post-colonial society and the international environment provide a fertile soil in which separatism and secession can propagate and flourish."³

The more a "nation's" potential or existing sovereignty is challenged, the deeper the nation-builders dig into the past to find ethno-national roots that are supposed to legitimize the present

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1 See: Mickey/Albion, in: Devetak/Flere/Seewann (1993), p. 63.

2 Sulzbach (1969), p. 12.

3 Mayall/Simpson, in: A. Smith (1992), p. 7-8.

project. This technique is easy and very similar throughout world regions. The effects, however, are quite different. The ethno-national myths brought forward by Palestinians and Israelis are part of a story which has global dimensions and is threatening to split great parts of the world into two camps. Moreover, their myths are enshrined in one of the most powerful media that has ever existed: the Bible. In comparison, the ethno-national myth of Bosnian Muslims looks rather humble, although we all know the horrible effects of ethno-national historiography of Serbs, Croats and Bosnjaks leading up to and occurring during the Balkan war in the 1990s.

The myths described and deconstructed in the following paper serve one and the same purpose. They are supposed to shape the idea of a long-lasting ethnic continuity of a group of people, the majority of whom consider themselves a nation in the German/"ethnic" sense and who claim the right to form or to sustain a nation-state in the actual international scenario. Ironically, these narratives go back further in time than the existence of the group's main means of contrast, religion (of course, religion in its pure form is not the reason for conflict, but a highly manipulated and politicized version of it). To put it in a more pointed way: the origin of the "nation" is considered to be older than the main reason why this group is actually in strife with its neighbours.

The Bogomil Myth in Bosnia-Herzegovina

With the final conquest of Bosnia (1463) and Herzegovina (1482) by the Ottomans the age of Islamization started in the region. However, Islam in Bosnia-Herzegovina was mostly a traditional and rather apolitical matter until modern times. It did not turn into an ethno-national feature, which could have been easily turned into broad aspirations towards a nation-state. Some cite the economic backwardness of Bosnia as one of several reasons for this. Another explanation is that traditional Islam is hardly compatible with the idea of national sovereignty: it is more oriented towards the all-Islamic community (*umma*) and does not allow smaller and rather hard units, fruits of European modern history, split Muslims into different political camps.⁴ Additionally, Islam in its origin followed a clearly supra-"ethnic" approach. This had repercussions until today on Muslim political thinking and also in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Here lies one reason why the concept of "nation-state" is also an alien element in the predominantly Muslim Middle East. It took shape only after the European colonial powers implanted it in the region.

The Islamic scepticism towards secular subunits of the all-Islamic *umma* makes it essential to distinguish Islamists and Muslim ethno-nationalists as two different streams. They are simply lumped together in many Western eyes. However, it is the ethno-national diversion from Islam which plays a role here.

To underline the "ethnic" distinction of Bosnjaks *vis-à-vis* Orthodox Serbs and Catholic Croats, Muslim ethno-nationalists refer to the role of the old Bosnian church, which is usually called Bogomil. It is no coincidence that the Bogomil myth experienced a boost whenever the

⁴ On the debate of Islam and nation resp. nation-state, see Weiss, in: Weiss (1986), p.2ff, Tibi (1987), Schimmel, in: Italiaander (1987) and, as a primary source, Khaldun (1958).

Zeitgeist suggested upgrading Bosnian Muslims as an ethno-nation against the ethno-national competition which viewed the Muslims as converted but “ethnic” Serbs, Croats or even Turks. This is especially true in the Austro-Hungarian period of Bosnia-Herzegovina (from 1900 onwards) and later in Tito’s Yugoslavia (from the 1960s onwards).

The myth is based on the presumption that today’s Muslims in Bosnia-Herzegovina can derive their descent directly from the Bosnian nobility of the Middle Ages, and that it had already established its identity through a church of its own—through Bogomilism.⁵ Thus it was able to protect itself from the appropriating attempts of the Orthodox Church and, above all, the Franciscans, who traditionally considered Bosnia-Herzegovina their missionary area. After the final Ottoman conquest of Bosnia-Herzegovina, so the myth goes, the Bosnian nobility willingly and unanimously converted to Islam. Since the majority of the Bosnian population consisted of Bogomils, they were also converted *en masse*. In this way they paved the way for consolidation of the Ottoman Empire. Simultaneously, they almost automatically rose to the status of a political ruling class as well as a socially and taxwise privileged class in Bosnia-Herzegovina.⁶

This version was advocated particularly by the communist Yugoslav and Muslim historian Atif Purivata (1928-2001). He intended to prove that Bogomils formed the “nucleus of Muslim nation-building.”⁷ His arguments came at a time when, in 1968, the Bosnian-Muslims in Yugoslavia were granted the suffix “in the national sense,” and when, in 1971, their status as a “nation” was embodied in the constitution. Purivata was convinced that “the overall socio-economic and particularly the cultural and political development of Moslems has affirmed them as a separate ethnic identity.”⁸ The thesis that today’s Muslims descended directly from the Bogomil nobility creates a genealogy that replaces the Islamic faith as the only criterion of identity. Instead, the Bosnian Muslims were seen to stem from their own age-old Bosnian culture. This is why, according to Purivata, the Muslims have to be strictly contrasted with the Turks, with whom they share religion only.⁹ The Bogomil myth served as a counter-narrative to the appropriation attempts of the more advanced neighbouring ethno-national projects of the Serbs and Croats.

However, this myth stands on shaky foundations, as recent research has shown. It brings the following arguments to bear:

1.) It is quite right that the Bosnian church had its own identity. It at least withstood the hierarchies of the Catholic and Orthodox churches outside Bosnia-Herzegovina. The country was not yet rigidly classified in terms of denominations. However, at the time of the Ottoman conquest the Bosnian church was already in decay.¹⁰ It was not a state church either. Therefore, the existence of a widespread Bogomil upper strata is doubtful. The Bosnian *beys* (Muslim noble

5 Fine, in: Pinson (1994), p.11ff; Dzaja (1978; 1984), Miedlig (1994), p.26ff; Höpken, in: Kappeler/Simon/Brunner (1989), p.18ff. For a more detailed account on Bogomilism, refer to: Malcolm (1996), p.27ff; Balic (1992), p.90ff.

6 The thesis postulated in such clear terms can be found particularly often in earlier treatises, for instance in: Ipsen, in: Markert (1954), p.29ff; Stavrianos (1958), p.63; Hadzijahic (1962), in: *SOF*, 192; Purivata, in: Blagojevic (1974); Bauer (1971), p.28, but surprisingly also in more recent works, for instance in: Bell-Fialkoff (1999), p.124, Mønnesland (1997); Hösch (1995), p.83; Reuter (1992), in: *SOE*, p.665; Meier, in: Schönfeld (1987), p.127.

7 Höpken, in: Kappeler/Simon/Brunner (1989), p.182.

8 Purivata, in: Blagojevic (1974), p.307.

9 Purivata, in: Blagojevic (1974), p.317.

10 Dzaja (1984), p.28-29.

landlords) had various origins. They came a) only partly from the Bosnian nobility, b) from the *Knabenlese*—a practice in which little boys were taken away from their parents at an early stage and raised forcefully in Islamic schools, c) from officials from Asia Minor who were allotted land in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and d) from immigrants of different origins, like Hungarians, Croats, Slavonians, Dalmatians and Serbs.¹¹

2.) In addition, the so-called “Bogomil treason” (the Bogomils had let the Ottomans into the country) turned out to be a “Bosnian stab-in-the-back legend,” as Dzaja writes convincingly. A papal legate was at a loss for an explanation because of the defeat against the Sultan, and therefore manipulated his report.¹²

3.) The Bosnian state in general had begun to decay. Even before the Ottoman conquest the kingdom had to pay tribute to the Sultan. The country’s feudal structure was fragmented and caught in strife. The Bosnian rulers often called the Sultan as mediator and protector. That is why the conquest came quite easy to the Ottomans.¹³

4.) Members of *all* religious sects converted to Islam, not the Bogomils alone.¹⁴ Therefore, most of the “new Muslims” were established Bosnians. Islamic believers did not immigrate to Bosnia-Herzegovina in large numbers. This also refutes the thesis (often used by Serb nationalists) that Bosnian Muslims were in fact Turks. Even though the leading Muslim clerics comprised Turks, Albanians, Tatars, Arabian Sunnites, and others, their number decreased consistently after the 15th century.

5.) There were no conversions *en masse* and hardly any under coercion (except for the *Knabenlese*). Conversions took place step by step and in different ways.¹⁵ Members of the political and military upper class were more ready to embrace Islam than the remaining population. For many Islamization had, first of all, a mere “declaratory character.”¹⁶ This meant that they at most adopted a Muslim name. Many also had pragmatic reasons for their conversions, for example, because the church was farther away than the mosque or because they hoped to win liberation from slavery, tax benefits or high posts. Islamization progressed faster in growing cities than in rural areas. A deepening of Islamic tradition, however, took many generations. Meanwhile, Muslims continued to pray in churches and kiss holy Christian symbols.¹⁷ This is why Fine speaks of “acceptance” of Islam rather than “conversion,” since lifestyles remained by and large unchanged.¹⁸

Even Purivata had softened his stance on this issue when I talked to him in June 2000. About one year before his death he acknowledged the research of Srečko Dzaja and Smail Balic.

11 Dzaja (1978), p.69. He refers to research conducted by V. Cubrilovic in 1935 (from sources from the 15th century) which has been confirmed today.

12 Dzaja (1984).

13 Miedlig (1994), p.28; Balic (1992), p.33; Hondius (1968), p.43-44.

14 See in particular Malcolm (1996), p.53; Dzaja (1978), p.69ff; Dzaja (1984), p.36ff; Birnbaum (1987), in: *WS*, p.14ff; Thomas, in: Thomas/Friman (1996), p.19.

15 This was first pointed out by the Bosnian researcher Nedim Filipovic. See in particular: Malcolm (1996), p.52; Dzaja (1978), p.72ff; Balic (1992), p.90ff. Lapidus (1988), p.309 refers to a census of 1520-30, according to which only 19 percent of the population in the Balkans were Muslim. In Bosnia-Herzegovina it was 45 percent. Everywhere most of the Muslims lived in cities.

16 Dzaja (1978), p.84.

17 Malcolm (1996), p.59.

18 Fine, in: Pinson (1996), p.19. See also: Lapidus (1988), p.309.

Today, he said, no scholar supports the Bogomil thesis in its pure version any more. Purivata suggested as a compromise that “We could say: *Most* Bogomils accepted Islam.... Also Orthodox and Croats did.” Surprisingly, he did not even exclude the possibility of a multi-religious “nation” in Bosnia in the future, which deviated substantially from his standpoint so far. He said, “In Bosnia, religion, ethnicity and nation are the same in some way. [...] But a nation with different religions... maybe some day we will have this here, too. Who knows?”¹⁹

The latest research also questions whether the Bosnian church was affiliated with the Bogomil monastic order from Bulgaria at all. This was what particularly the Croatian historian Franjo Racki had claimed (in articles of 1869/70). The Bosnians themselves called each other *Krstjani* (Christians). Now whether the Bosnians were partly Bogomils or rather followed an “archaic monastic church”²⁰ or displayed Catholic traits²¹ does not in any way affect the arguments above.

From today’s point of view it is much more interesting—and typical—that Racki’s theory had two *contemporary* rivals: one was represented by the Serb author Petranovic, who believed that the Bosnian church was in fact an apostate Serbian Orthodox one; the other was represented by Catholic writers who were convinced that the Bosnian church was indeed a branch of the Catholic one.²² What this is supposed to mean in the context of religion-based nation-building is clear: the Bosnian Muslims are supposed to be either “Serbs” or “Croats.”

All in all, the Bogomil-thesis is in fact a dual myth which the latest research has refuted. First: the Bosnian Bogomil nobility did not convert to Islam “as one man” followed by the entire population. Second: the members of the medieval Bosnian church were no Bogomils at all. The whole argument boils down to this: The Bosnian church was one—but only *one*—factor which left its mark on the Islamization of Bosnia-Herzegovina. The Bogomil myth is a “historically unsustainable attempt” to construct Muslim nation-building similar to that of the Serbs and Croats.²³ The statement that “the Ottoman occupation encountered an already established people of Bosnians,”²⁴ which continued unhindered, must therefore be placed in the realm of ethno-national legends. The Ottomanization represented rather an institutional break for Bosnia.²⁵

The refutation of the Bogomil-myth means that the “Muslims” in Bosnia-Herzegovina do not have a longer ethnic and social continuity than their neighbours. The retrospective ethno-national attempts of appropriation of the Bosnian church aim at revealing primordial factors that establish, categorize, and instrumentalize “the Bosnian Muslims” as an “ethnic group.”

Since the Serb and Croatian ethno-nationalisms have had a longer and stronger tradition, the Bogomil myth of ethno-national Bosnjaks can be seen as part of a reactive nationalist endeavour. In this regard, there is a parallel to Palestinian ethno-nationalism as a reaction to Zionism.

19 Purivata in an interview with the author in Sarajevo (June 27th 2000). He stated that in the 1960s, he only had available findings from the Yugoslav author Aleksandar Soloviev.

20 Steindorff (1997), in: *SOEM*, p.279. Malcolm (1996), p.27ff gives a detailed account of the doubts that exist in considering the church as “Bogomil”. He himself, however, abstains from any judgement.

21 This is Fine’s claim in: Pinson (1996), p.8.

22 Malcolm (1996), p.28-29; S. Ramet (1990), in: *SSJ*, p.5.

23 Höpken, in: Kappeler/Simon/Brunner (1989), p.182.

24 Hadzijahic (1962), in: *SOF*, p.178.

25 Dzaja (1984), p.40.

Who came first to the “Holy Land”?

Being at war with one another in the streets and dry hills of the Middle East is conflict enough. Israeli and Palestinian ideologues, however, also make use of the weapons of historiography more than almost anywhere else in the world. Similarly to the Balkans, the bone of contention has to do with who was the first one on the soil, and who thus has a right to claim state territory, including political and “national” sovereignty.

In April 2002, when the Israeli Offensive Defensive Shield was in full swing in the occupied territories, two quotations captured this argumentative circle quite well. Replying to the demand of Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon that he should go into exile, the Palestinian leader Yassir Arafat in his besieged headquarter in Ramallah said angrily: “Is this my homeland or his? We [Palestinians] were here before the Prophet Abraham. Don’t the Israelis know the history?”²⁶

In August 1996 Palestinians from all over the West Bank gathered in the city of Sabastiyah to revive the legend of Ba’al, the Canaanite god of the sky and fertility. Palestinians, even if slowly, have learned from the Israelis to use archaeology for present purposes of nation-building. The Al-Quds-University in Jerusalem demands that all students, regardless of their faculty, visit seminars on the archaeological history of Palestine, of which the Canaanites play an important part. Marwan Abu Khalaf, the director of the archaeological institute of this university said, “Our customs and traditions trace back to the Canaanites. Did you know that the Canaanites were actually Arabs? They came for the search of water from the Arabian Peninsula. Abraham followed only 2000 years later.”²⁷

Shortly after Arafat’s statement in April 2002, Sharon’s foreign policy adviser, Danni Ayalon, stated in a TV-interview: “We are no occupiers. We live in a God-given land.”²⁸ He said further that today’s Israel was the product of 4000 years of Jewish nation-building. On the internet-page of the Israeli government one can also read that the Jewish people became a “nation” in the 17th century B.C., when Abraham settled in the region called Canaan.

Both sides turn in circles within the same paradigm of “ancient ethnicity.” In the Israeli case it is complemented by the dogma of a “God-given land” turned into a political territory. The Palestinian archaeologist Adel Yachia has pointed out the nonsense of this game in an interview in 2002: “When people die through suicide bombers in buses or fight each other bloodily in the West Bank, it is stupid to argue about who was first 4000 years ago.” By means of historiography, he complained, Israelis justify the expulsion of the Palestinians from their homeland: “For the Jews, history has become their second religion.” The Palestinians themselves, he said, do not have to go so far back in history as Arafat does. Most of them were expelled only 50 years ago after the foundation of the Israeli state.²⁹

However, most Palestinian political leaders fall into the same trap of almost pre-historic justification. Bernard Lewis draws parallels to other cases in the Middle East: “Had the Jews disappeared like most of the peoples of antiquity, the Palestinians might have claimed to be the heirs of ancient Israel, as the Egyptians were of the pharaohs and the Iraqis of the kings of

26 Quote from DPA press coverage by the author, Tel Aviv, April 2002.

27 Marcus (2001), p.114.

28 Quote from DPA press coverage by the author, Tel Aviv, April 2002.

29 Yachia in an interview with the author, Ramallah 10.05.2002.

Babylon. But the Jews had not disappeared and were even returning, and the Palestinians therefore sought their legitimacy in the pre-Israelite inhabitants of Palestine, the Canaanites.”³⁰

The discussion that Palestinians directly descend from the Canaanites and Israelis from the Israelites as a “chosen people” has been going on for a long while and has been nurtured by the writings of the Bible authors. However, the most recent research from Israeli and international archaeologists as well as from Bible scholars has started to seriously damage the narratives on which the Zionist ideology is based—and consequently the Palestinian counterpart as well.

Starting out from the bone of contention—the Biblical story—the myth of the ancient Jewish nation, roughly speaking, goes as follows:

The twisted narrative of a family dynasty turned into a “Jewish nation” is concentrated in the first five books of the Bible, or the books of Moses, called Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy—also known as the Old Testament for Christians or the Torah for Jews. It all began with Abraham who is, of course, a key figure for Jews, Christians and Muslims alike. He is said to have moved, on the order of God, from Ur in Mesopotamia to the “promised land” of Canaan. He went to Hebron, where some of the most radical representatives of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict live today.

Adherents of all three religions cherish holy sites connected with the patriarch Abraham reaching from Baghdad via Turkey and Syria to Israel/Palestine. His life and surrounding stories have been dated back to the Bronze Age (2000 to 1550 before the Christian Era). According to the Bible, Abraham founds a family whose members are engaged in dramas of jealousy, especially his grandsons. One of them, Joseph, is sold as a slave by his brothers to merchants who are on their way to Egypt. Over there, Joseph makes an unexpected career as a minister to the pharaoh and is finally reconciled with his brothers. The clan continues to live in Egypt where the proto-Israelites become enslaved again and start their history as a “nation”, or so the Bible claims.

A central part of the mythical Jewish nation-building is the exodus from Egypt, allegedly around 1260 or 1250 B.C.. Under the guidance of Moses some 600,000 proto-Israelites escape the yoke of the pharaoh and start a 40-year-long odyssey through the desert northwards. According to the Bible and many of its interpreters, this experience finally welds them into a fully-fledged nation, a nation that fixes an “eternal bond” with God (*Jahwe*). He hands over to them the Ten Commandments carved into stone plates. The proto-Israelites carry them through the desert in the Ark of the Covenant, which has become a core national symbol.

The next step involves the alleged conquest of Canaan, which has been dated between 1250 to 1225 B.C.. As the myth goes, after the desert march the early Israelite tribes cross the Jordan towards the west, conquer the “holy land” in bloody battles, extinguish the Canaanites and their culture, and establish their own nationhood there. In the Bible, the difference between the Canaanites and the Israelites is that the former worship idols, celebrate sex orgies, and drink alcohol, whereas the latter lead a virtuous and monotheistic life.

In the end, as the myth continues, the Israelites create a powerful and homogeneous kingdom with David and then Solomon as their leaders. Great temples, monuments, and city fortifications were allegedly built during this time. In modern terms this is depicted as a Jewish

30 Lewis (1998), p. 74.

nation-state with one king, one territory, one national God. Following this argumentation, this construct is the predecessor of the present Erez Israel. In this paradigm, the Zionist movement did not create anything new in the 20th century but carried on where the Israelites left off.

This is the core argumentation which leads to the claim of sovereignty in the age of so-called nation-states and classic international law. Of course, there are a lot of modern situational ingredients to Israeli nation-building like the Holocaust, the climax of a series of pogroms against Jews throughout Europe. But the ethno-national myths enshrined in the Torah have delivered the ideological material to keep pace with the modern European phenomenon of nationalism, which works with the same tools. In this way, the discourse within the Zionist movement at the beginning of the 20th century was diverted from a pragmatic concept of statehood with different territorial options, even such as Uganda, towards an ethnic concept of nation combined with the irrefutable notion of a “holy land” turned into a modern—and, of course, highly disputed—territory. The striving for state sovereignty began to take on a sacred character.

It took some 2000 years for the myths of the Bible to be effectively challenged. A recent wave of research by Bible scholars and archaeologists has brought about a heated debate regarding long-held dogmas. Some even compare the findings of the 1990s and 2000s and the connected publications to the bursting of a dam.³¹

Roughly speaking, there are now three camps that represent different degrees of criticism, and that hold different views of the Bible’s age. The *traditionalists* claim that the main texts came to be at around 1000 B.C.. They still consider the Bible a history book. The *moderates* think that it was written and published around 600 B.C. One of the most influential representatives of this stream is Israel Finkelstein, head of the archaeological institute of the University of Tel Aviv.³² The moderates question some core claims of the Bible but, like Finkelstein, many remain in the ethno-national paradigm. The most critical scholars, who depict the Bible as prevalingly unhistoric, are known as *minimalists* or *revisionists* or the *Copenhagen School*. They hold the Bible to be a “Hellenistic opus,” written after 330 B.C. and therefore after the death of the Greek philosophers Socrates and Plato.³³ Their thorough deconstruction of Biblical and hence Zionist myths has brought them overwhelming criticism up to the point of charging them with anti-Semitism. Their studies have been even equated with the denial of the Holocaust.³⁴

The main points of the minimalists and moderates are the following:

1) A long row of contradictions and discrepancies between the narrative and archaeological findings has made them doubt the existence of Abraham, and, more importantly, the exodus from

31 Dirk Kinet, scholar of Biblical languages at the university of Augsburg, according to: “Der leere Thron”, in: *Der Spiegel* 52/2002.

32 See particularly his recent book written with Neil Asher Silberman: *The Bible Unearthed* (2001) [*Keine Posaunen vor Jericho* (2003)].

33 “Der leere Thron”, in: *Der Spiegel* (52/2002), p. 138.

34 More on this stream in Marcus (2001), p. 145ff. The debate was sparked by Philip R. Davies, professor of the university of Sheffield in England with his book “In Search of ‘Ancient Israel’”.

Egypt. According to the latest research, there was no ethnically different, proto-Jewish diaspora in Egypt, no odyssey through the desert and probably no Moses at all.³⁵

2) Given the above, there was no conquest of Canaan. Instead, the origins of the ancient Israelites cannot be traced to Egypt but to Canaan itself. This renders the claims of the modern ethno-nationalists absurd that Palestinians are the direct offspring of the Canaanites and the Israelis from the Israelites.

Many places that were conquered by the Israelites according to the Bible, the most famous among them being Jericho, were neither occupied nor destroyed. They were not fortified in the first place, as the Bible authors claim in order to paint the battle of the Israelites in heroic colours. Archaeological findings rather support the thesis of a gradual but distinct social transformation in the land of Canaan instead of one ethnic group supplanting another one in a quick and cruel conquest.³⁶ Marcus hits on this point when she writes, “To differentiate Israelites from Canaanites is so difficult because Israelites and Canaanites were one and the same people.”³⁷

Even if the Israelites were peaceful immigrants, as one theory goes,³⁸ they had taken over many customs from the Canaanites, including rural religious practices, some of which have later developed into Jewish holidays like Sukkoth, Passah and Shabuoth. Syncretism was common and lasted for a much longer period of time than the Bible would have its readers believe. Jahwe himself is considered to have been part of a Canaanite cult of fertility, one of many varieties of the Canaanite weather god Baal. Over a long period, the people sacrificed other Canaanite gods to Jahwe.³⁹ Therefore it is almost impossible to distinguish between ethnic groups when it comes to religious practices. Other evidence could be found in bones. Some scholars like Finkelstein draw on the ban of pork to make out a “specific Israeli ethnicity.” Others, however, dismiss this indicator since most other tribes in these regions abstained from pork as well.⁴⁰

It is the minimalists who most strongly doubt the account of a great religious reform which later led to the ethno-national formula of one God, one nation, one territory. In their view, the great cultural reform of a king called Josiah, who allegedly eradicated all polytheisms, is just another exaggeration of later times. Still around 600 B.C. there were no religious differences between the people living in Judah (in today’s southern Israel) and the surrounding populations.⁴¹

3) During the time of David and Solomon in the 10th century B.C. the region was still very little developed. The settlements consisted of small villages, including Jerusalem.⁴² Life was rural and simple. Archaeological findings have not found any indications of great monuments or

35 Not even Israeli archeologists who went out to collect proofs of their national narrative found indications of an Israelite exodus from Egypt when they digged about in the Sinai peninsula between 1967 and 1982, when Israel held that piece of land. Marcus (2001), p.95ff. See also: Finkelstein/Silberman (2003), p. 73ff; “Der leere Thron”, in: *Der Spiegel* (52/2002), p.141.

36 Finkelstein/Silberman (2003), p.86ff, 104ff, p.123.

37 Marcus (2001), p. 100 (own re-translation).

38 An overview of the different theories can be found in : Finkelstein/Silberman (2003), p. 117ff.

39 Marcus (2001), p.104, 105. She falls back on findings from the archeologist Amnon Ben-Tor.

40 Finkelstein/Silberman (2003), p.136; Marcus (2001), p. 35, 37.

41 According to the Bible scholar Herbert Niehr. “Der leere Thron”, in: *Der Spiegel*(52/2003), p. 144. Finkelstein/Silberman (2003), p. 309ff.

42 Finkelstein/Silberman (2003), p. 141. The minimalist Gunnar Lehmann in an interview with the author, December 6th, 2002, in Jerusalem.

flourishing cities. Even the early construction of a great and central temple on today's Temple Mount has turned out to be a myth. So far, there are no archaeological hints for even the second temple, built after the alleged destruction of the first one by the Babylonians in 515 B.C..

The German archaeologist Gunnar Lehmann from Beersheva University is convinced that the Israelites were by far not the "core people" of the region that the Bible claims. Instead, they were economically dependent on the tribes living in the more developed and fertile coastal areas. "Consequently, David was rather a vassal of the hostile Philistines," Lehmann said. Another irony: Solomon could never be invited into any Jewish house nowadays, since "he did so many unkosher things in his life. For example, he had non-Jewish wives."⁴³

For some time, the minimalists even believed that David and Solomon did not exist at all, until inscriptions were discovered in northern Israel in 1993 that mention their dynasty.⁴⁴ Still, critical Bible scholars and archaeologists believe that the achievements of both figures have been highly exaggerated. They are also convinced that the kingdom of David and Solomon was split from the beginning into two different communities. There was neither a centralized state structure nor a homogeneous culture, let alone a great empire. According to Finkelstein, the northern entity named Israel may have come close to a state while the southern bit of Judah tended to be poorer and lagged some 200 years behind in development. It was shortly after Solomon's death (around 931 B.C.) that the two parts disengaged completely and created different histories.⁴⁵ The only explanation the Bible gives for the decay of Solomon's "great empire" is religious blasphemy and polytheism.

The Biblical description of two brotherly states with a common ethnic, cultural, and religious heritage does not fit the reality shown by this research. Although both parts had several things in common, such as a similar language, the same script, and the worship of Jawhe as a god, there were many obvious differences. Marcus states: "As to culture, political development, settlement structure and climate, Judah had more in common with Edom in southern Jordan than with Israel."⁴⁶

The myth of the Golden Age of David and Solomon has been refuted. There are no indications to believe that the two ruled any kind of advanced state structure with a central government, not to mention a single empire, or even a nation-state.⁴⁷ Indications of a highly developed administration, like seals or inscriptions, can be found only a hundred years later, at a time when the neighbouring kingdoms of Moab and Damascus also began to consolidate. Another fact which supports this thesis is that the alleged high culture, the great political and architectural achievements of David and Solomon are not mentioned in Egyptian or Mesopotamian texts.⁴⁸ Strangely enough, they also went unnoticed by the great Hellenistic writers.⁴⁹

43 Lehmann in an interview with the author on December 6th, 2002, in Jerusalem.

44 The discovery became known as the inscriptions in the "House of David". Finkelstein/Silberman (2003), p. 145-146.

45 Finkelstein/Silberman (2003), p. 168, 171ff; Marcus (2001), p.143.

46 Marcus (2001), p. 161 (own re-translation).

47 Marcus (2001), p.142; Finkelstein/Silberman (2003), p.148, 159, 167. Lehmann in an interview with the author on December 6th, 2002.

48 Finkelstein/Silberman (2003), p. 145.

49 "Der leere Thron", in: *Der Spiegel* (52/2002), p. 144.

All this speaks against the establishment of an early Jewish “nation-state” whose existence could be instrumentalized in favour of some form of historical continuity (with interruptions) with today’s modern state of Israel. The second argument against it comes, of course, from the history of ideas: nationalism, nation-building and nation-states are distinctly modern phenomena, only making their appearance after the French Revolution.

However, with the escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the argument of continuity is increasingly used even by liberal Israeli historians like Benny Morris from the Ben Gurion University in Beersheva. He holds that, in contrast to the Muslims, the Jews had disposed of their own statehood since Saulus, and later under David and Solomon, until the second and final defeat against the Romans in the second century A.D.. The Muslims or Palestinians, in turn, had no such pre-history and derived their (counter-)identity from the Zionist movement and increasing Jewish immigration at the beginning of the 20th century (the second half of the statement being basically true). Morris holds this view, however, as a secular Zionist, independent of the notion of a divine destiny: “I just doubt the god-given aspect [of the story], since I don’t know if God exists.”⁵⁰

When it comes to explaining the motives of the Bible’s distortions, the moderates and the minimalists offer different explanations. The moderate critics like Finkelstein hold that the script served as propaganda material for the religious-political leadership of Judah, which did not start to develop until at least 8th century B.C.. After the more developed northern entity Israel had been conquered and annexed by the Assyrians (in 723/722 B.C.), the southern Judah with its capital Jerusalem gradually grew into a power vacuum. The more developed Israel had always been a political competitor. Therefore it was played down by the Bible authors who depicted Judah as the obedient, God chosen entity, whereas the people and dynasties of Israel were described as blasphemous and outrageous. The project of the Bible during Judah’s rise was to centralize the religious cult, to create a common identity, and—in the rather far-fetched and modern terminology used by Finkelstein—to establish a “national history”. It starts as early as Abraham, who was deliberately placed so as to live in Hebron, in later Judah.

This process intensified more than half a century after the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem (587/586 B.C.) under Nebukadnezar, when the scholar Esra and the administrator Nehemia returned from the so-called Babylonian captivity and began with a political and religious revival of the town.⁵¹ The laws were strictly tailored according to Deuteronomy. From this time on, the Jewish religion cut itself off from the surrounding people and acquired ethnic or even racial traits. Mixed marriages were forbidden and the dissimilarity of the Jewish people vis-à-vis their neighbours was strongly emphasized.⁵² The Bible was revised once again, and in retrospective Jerusalem appeared in the limelight of all events.

Minimalists give a different reason for the Bible authors’ intentions. According to them, it was the Makkabeans (or Hasmoneans) who finally revised the “holy book” for their needs. After the Babylonians (and later the Persians) reigned over the region, Alexander the Great conquered Judah in 332 B.C.. This was followed by the reigns of several tribes until the Jewish Makkabeans

50 Morris in an interview with the author on May 10th, 2002.

51 Doubts about the Biblical account of a deportation of the whole Jewish “nation” can be found in Marcus (2001), p. 189ff.

52 See also Finkelstein/Silberman (2003), p. 322. This concept stands very much in contrast to Islam which has a distinctly supra-racial and more inclusive approach.

won a long civil war and established their state in 141 B.C.. The German theologian Bernd Jörg Diebner considers this the moment when the dream of the great pan-Israelite empire was born as the central thread in the Bible texts.⁵³

In the present struggle for national sovereignty in the Middle East, the theses of the moderate and minimalist critics have naturally provoked an echo on the Palestinian side as well. As one example, Lehmann told me that whenever Palestinian students of archaeology hear about the deconstructive method of the minimalists, they are enthusiastic about it, “until I started to turn the tables and did the same with the contents of the Koran.” As soon as this happened, they cried: “No, you can’t do this, the Koran is holy!” Lehmann said, “This leads to the point that we will never understand each other. The discourses run totally cross.” He also complained that most Palestinians see archaeologists still as their enemies and intruders because they suspect them of supporting an expansionist Zionist cause. “They are afraid that we take away their [national] legitimacy.” In the Middle East, archaeology is indeed a very political matter and a “national” task in most countries. The Palestinian authority also understood this and founded its own ministry of archaeology shortly after the Oslo peace accord in 1993.⁵⁴

This does not mean, however, that there is any meaningful academic progress. Lehmann recalls another group of Palestinian archaeology students with whom he visited the Wailing Wall and the Temple Mount. They insisted that all they saw was built by the Islamic caliphs, even the lower layers that are older than Islam itself. “This was very depressing”, Lehmann said. “Empiricism does not count at all.” Only one by one they admitted, when the others were not listening, that Lehmann might be right. They were just afraid to say this in front of the group and back home in front of their professors.⁵⁵

The national myths and taboos on both sides have also made the Temple Mount or Haram Al-Sharif principally undividable. Religious and ethno-national zealotry has made many peace rounds fail, and even created new vocabulary in the field of international law. During the desperate negotiation attempts of the former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, Palestinian leader Yassir Arafat and former U.S. president Bill Clinton in Maryland in summer 2000 and in the Egyptian resort of Taba in January 2001, the Temple Mount once again crystallized as the core problem. Since religion and ethno-national sovereignty are so closely connected, no side was ready to give in on this symbolic issue. Several options were discussed, for example a common or Palestinian trust administration over this tiny bit of land. In the end, the Israelis made concessions in so far as they wanted to accept Palestinian sovereignty over the *upper* layers of the Temple Mount with the Dome of the Rocks and the Al-Aqsa Mosque. The *lower* stones, however, should be under Israeli “sovereignty” as part of the Jewish national heritage and history. The surprising notion of a *vertical sovereignty* was a novum in international law and obviously an unfulfillable demand.

Next to this issue there also remained a horizontal problem. A contentious point of the Clinton proposal involved whether it envisaged as Israeli sovereign territory only the 57 meter long Wailing Wall or the whole 470 meter long Western wall of the Temple Mount. A solution to the bloody and long conflict literally depended on metres and centimetres of “holy” old stones in a city which has changed its prevailing faith a dozen times in history.

53 “Der leere Thron”, in: *Der Spiegel* (52/2002), p. 147

54 Marcus (2001), p. 24.

55 Lehmann in an interview with the author on December 6th, 2002, in Jerusalem.

The fight about ethno-national sovereignty in Israel and Palestine consists of literally all three topographic dimensions. It is about conventional as well as symbolic territory due to an exceptionally close connection between land and religious myths that have turned into indispensable sources of ethno-national state legitimization. This conflict will remain a vicious circle as long as both sides stick to the same paradigm of historical argumentation. Both sides claim the same spots of land as the core of their ethno-national existence.

As to the question of who was first in the “holy land,” they even end up claiming to be descendents of the same people who used to live in this area, as recent research has shown. Given the manifold tribes, peoples and cultures that lived in this region at that time, the argument that today’s Israelis, with their extremely colourful ethnic backgrounds from all over the world, are direct descendents from the Israelites, and the Palestinians, with their young history of nation-building, are an offspring of the Canaanites, is historical nonsense. Put into a European context, this problem appears equally absurd, as Lehmann points out: “You could also ask: Are the Germans actually Teutons, Alemanni or Celts?” For this reason, he recommends a look ahead instead. Reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians could only be possible with a changed historiography and new school books. This also worked with former arch enemies France and Germany. “From this example we can learn a lot here in the Middle East,” Lehmann said.⁵⁶

However, even the very critical publications show how deeply rooted the ethno-national paradigm still is. A stunning example is Finkelstein’s and Silberman’s book. At the same time that they deconstruct central Biblical myths, they stick to the terminology of Jewish nation-building from Biblical times onwards. They do not distance themselves from these claims as much as use the term “nation” in a surprisingly unreflective way. For example, Finkelstein and Silberman refer to a “nation” which grew out of Jacob’s clan, the grandson of Abraham,⁵⁷ a “nation” which was enslaved in Egypt,⁵⁸ and which established itself in Canaan. They describe the society in Judah as one that has “developed a clear national consciousness.”⁵⁹ Sentences like the following, in which Finkelstein and Silberman refer to the Babylonian conquest of Judah in 597 B.C. and the subsequent destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, nurture the belief in legends and some kind of unique Jewish destiny: “The religion and national existence of the people of Israel could have ended in this great disaster. Miraculously, both survived.”⁶⁰ They do not conceal their admiration of the Biblical glamour when they write: “The saga of Israel, that had first crystallized in the time of Josiah, became the world’s first fully articulated national and social compact.”⁶¹ These utterances put grist on the mill of the ethno-national myth-makers whom Finkelstein and Silberman set out to confront. One could guess that they attempt to split their goals between their ideas of scholarly deconstruction and their desire to remain socially, scholarly and politically accepted in a predominantly Zionist environment.

It is true that Israel seems to be an exception in the region when it comes to the country’s designation. Israel is a state with a name known since antiquity. But this is a deception, as Lewis points out: “Its presence is due not to a survival but to a restoration after a political discontinuity

56 Lehmann in an interview with the author on December 6th, 2002, in Jerusalem.

57 Finkelstein/Silberman (2003), p. 44

58 Finkelstein/Silberman (2003), p. 45

59 Finkelstein/Silberman (2003), p. 59

60 Finkelstein/Silberman (2003), p. 316.

61 Finkelstein/Silberman (2003), p. 337.

of almost two millennia.”⁶² And after these 2000 years, something completely new and different came to be. There are many debates about to what degree Israel can be called a nation, or even an ethno-nation, given its unique and exceptional composition of various ethnic groups with different historical, social, political and even linguistic backgrounds. Many of the recent one million immigrants from post-Soviet Russia do not speak Hebrew, the language that was rescued from oblivion by the Zionist movement.⁶³ The language has been one of the core components in constructing an “ethnic group,” and consequently an ethno-nation, out of a group of fellow-believers spread throughout the globe, in contrast to other fellow-believers in this world who do not consider themselves an ethno-nation nor raise any claim to a sovereign nation-state. On the other side, there are Israelis who are non-religious. Consequently, they reject the message of the Bible and thus its ethno-national myths on which the state in which they are living is founded. Then there are those Orthodox Jews who are evidently religious but reject the state of Israel just because of this reason. And so it goes on.

This heterogeneity is a potential threat to ethno-nation-builders—in this case to Zionist ideologues. These disintegrating factors are counteracted by the conflict with a common external enemy like the Palestinians and the neighbouring Arab states, and an almost daily cultivation of the memory of the Holocaust for political instrumentalization.⁶⁴ But there are also more modern factors which could be cited in favour of Israel as a (very young) nation. One simply involves the 50 years of common political and social experience and the generations who were born on this piece of land and feel that they are Israeli citizens, be they religious or not. In this light, a much more convincing argument for the state of Israel would not be an exclusive, aggressive and backward oriented ethno-nationalism but a secular, civic-democratic, post-Zionist state, as the Israeli sociologist Uri Ram suggests.⁶⁵

On the Palestinian side, the matter looks quite similar. The name as a political designation, however, is very young. It stems from the British when they coined their mandated territory after World War I. Originally, the Greek word denoted a Roman province and refers to yet another vanished people in the area, the Philistines. Arab identities have shifted many times throughout the centuries. Only the French revolution brought about the notion of nation and state into the Middle East, and among them Palestine is one of the youngest.⁶⁶ Not long ago it was a fuzzy regional description and blurred with another recent denotation, i.e. Jordanian. Lewis writes: “Today the differences between Jordanians and Palestinians are a compound of old-fashioned regional particularism, recent and current experience, and ideological and political choices.”⁶⁷ One provocative explanation of the Palestinian problem in its later phase is that it was less a people in search of a country than a political elite in search of a state,⁶⁸ including the search of political and economic resources which come along with state sovereignty.

However, as in the Israeli case, one could state that the intense experience of conflict has strengthened the Palestinian notion of nation vis-à-vis the Israelis as much as vis-à-vis the

62 Lewis (1998), p. 63.

63 Hebrew ceased to exist as a living language around the time of the so-called Babylonian Captivity in the 5th century B.C., when the Jews switched to Aramaic. The Zionists revived the idiom and made it the official language with the foundation of Israel in 1948. See, among others: Schweizer (1998), p.45.

64 See also the controversial book on the “Holocaust Industry” by N.G. Finkelstein (2001).

65 Ram (2001), in: *JIH*, p.43ff; Ram (1995), especially p. 205ff

66 Lewis (1998), p. 58ff.

67 Lewis (1998), p. 77.

68 Lewis (1998), p. 105.

neighbouring Arab states, many of whom have let them down, denied them full citizens' rights and hindered their social integration. Given the territorial dispersal in this tiny piece of land, state-building does not make sense from a sound pragmatic, economic and infrastructural perspective. Instead, the West Bank would be better kept with Jordan and the Gaza Strip with Egypt. This solution, however, has drifted out of reach because of increasing Palestinian nationalism and the longing for sovereignty in the family of "nation-states". The other sound option of a unified state of Israelis and Palestinians on the basis of individual human rights, pluralism, secularism and democratic nationalism appears to be reduced to academic value as well.

Instead, the arrangement again reminds one of the Balkans, where tiny pieces of land have suddenly become a matter of ethno-national battle and an issue of international law. Just as in some of the peace plans envisaged for Bosnia, the Israeli landscape has been pierced with tunnels, bridges and bypass-roads, so that the opposing "ethnic groups" will not get in touch with each other. In the Balkans and Middle East the quite young ethno-national boundaries have hardened. In the Middle East, they stem from the original colonial boundaries, which have gradually turned into national ones. Five factors increase the problem in the two regions. It is the ethno-national paradigm which is particularly explosive in an area of dispersed population structures, combined with ideological expansionism, the claim of a sovereign (nation-)state fed by national myths from antiquity. They serve as a domestic back-up to this claim and a broad political motivation.

What are the options to get out of this vicious circle? One could start out with a fundamental critique of absolute state sovereignty as it has been postulated by classic international law. Louis Henkin, for example, considers the term "sovereignty" superfluous and normatively overloaded. It is its artificial glamour which makes political actors strive to this level and which also provokes unities to break free from well-functioning associations.⁶⁹ However, it seems unlikely that a change of thinking will come about early enough in this field.

Another approach could be to break out of the ethno-national paradigm. As much as ethno-nationalism has taken root today, and as much as it plays a key role in the conflicts mentioned, this also seems a distant wish. Nevertheless, in Bosnia the attempt is being made by institutions of the international community and some local actors. At least in this part of ex-Yugoslavia the endgame of an ethno-national state had not been reached, partly because most Bosnian Muslims lacked the political motivation to demand and fight for their "nation-state," despite all the national myths and a rare political opportunity. In Israel the ethno-national paradigm has a very strong religious and geographic connotation. On the Palestinian side, where a reactive ethno-nationalism prevails, the chances to leave this ideological burden behind are dim, too. Both sides need to break out of this paradigm at the same time.

A piecemeal remedy for the Balkans as well as for the Middle East would be a shift in state legitimization. In fact, it has something to do with the rewriting of school books as Lehmann suggested. On the political level, it means that the domestic and international legitimization of the modern state would be made less dependent on ancient myths but defined in terms of actual political behaviour, performance of the state apparatus, the social balance sheet, citizens' and human rights, and economic progress. It comes close to an enlightened nationalism in the

69 Henkin, in: Macdonald (1993).

Habermas sense.⁷⁰ If these become the accepted standards to compete with each other, the existing different interests become more negotiable. The international community can take responsibility in this development. By means of bilateral or supranational pressure, a specific form of domestic organization and codified values can become a precondition for the normative acceptance of a state or even its formal sovereignty in international law.⁷¹

An important step on the way to creating new domestic discourses is the deconstruction of ethno-national myths, until they become untenable to ever wider ranges of the population. It is a difficult task because it undermines the fundamentals of ethno-national ideologies, and great parts of the political and cultural establishment have much to lose. The example of the Bible makes this problem particularly obvious. But each step in this direction has two important effects: on the philosophical level, debunking myths is part of the noble process of enlightenment; in more practical terms, the delinking of (selective or false) historiography from political projects creates more room for much needed social and political alternatives. Thus it may also be a small step towards peace in these shattered regions.

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70 Habermas, in: Balakrishnan (1996), p. 290.

71 The C.S.C.E. (today O.S.C.E.) took a first step in this direction after the Cold War. Its members from opposing political camps professed – formally – a community of values. They accepted peoples' sovereignty, democracy and constitutionality as domestic principles of organization. Stronger and practical significance obtained the Badinter Commission which was set up by the E.C. just before the break-up of Yugoslavia. It made the protection of minorities a precondition for recognizing the Yugoslav republics as independent states. It is another story that the politicians ignored the demands of the commission to a large extent. Still, it meant a qualification of state sovereignty. This becomes even more obvious in the C.S.C.E.'s policy after the collapse of Yugoslavia: The Conference changed its mode of decision-making from unanimity to "consensus minus one". The "one" in this case was rump-Yugoslavia. See also: Steinberg, in: Damrosch (1993), p. 57.

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