Michael Wolffsohn

WHOSE HOLY LAND?

The Roots of the Conflict Between Jews and Arabs

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This book is dedicated to all the people who have wanted to live *in the Holy Land—without killing others*

Foreword

To whom does the Holy Land—Israel, Palestine—belong? This question is millennia old, but reverberates (again) globally with renewed intensity during the last 200 years due to the dual impact of external, often imperial, ambitions and conflicting desires for national self-determination and statehood. From a religious angle, the land is dear, even holy, to several major religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, but also the Bahai, Druze, and Samaritan faith. Michael Wolffsohn invites us in this fascinating book to embark on a journey: to explore and critically question the religious, and political, roots of all-too-often exclusive claims to this territory from the dawn of human civilization to the present era. The book is a fantastic orientation for everybody interested in a humanistic and at the same time historically informed analysis of this land located at the Eastern shores of the Mediterranean—the cradle of so much of humanity's religious, cultural, and social heritage.

The book is written in accessible and entertaining prose—while the depth of arguments presented in it speaks to the author's intellectual ambition and perspective. What one should not expect, though, is an argument in favor of a given religion, state, people, or political movement of more or less "owning" this land. As Wolffsohn makes clear: this is a book for all people who ever lived, live, or in fact will live in this land—or longed to do so. Following this credo, tolerance is required, and accepting the attachments and sincerity of senses of belonging of many diverse groups. Many of them are well known like Jews, Christians, and Muslims—or Israelis and Palestinians. Others less so, like the Samaritans, the Bahai, the Druze, and others. This land belongs to none of these groups exclusively, but what is exclusive are diverse forms of attachment each of these groups holds in relation to the land. The question

then is, as Michael Wolffsohn accurately states, how the people and political movements in this land can—if ever—leave the history of relative tolerance behind, which characterized relations between people there over the last millennia (let alone periods of complete intolerance): how do people who feel like owning the land manage to arrive at a much more fundamental sense of togetherness, of exclusive but shared senses of belonging? Senses of belonging that respect each group's historically formed, and emotionally deep, senses of attachment. This is a deeper question to which this book speaks so convincingly.

Religion is—as politics—often associated with an impossibility to arrive at such senses of shared but diverse belonging. But is that true? One of the remarkable insights from this book is Michael Wolffsohn's analysis of different religious traditions, of course foremost in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. He elaborates how all these three religions (often to the despair of religious people and fundamental leaders, reflecting the tendency of religious movements in the course of human history to descend on a path of intolerance) inhibit a deep sense of shared identity with the respective others. There is no clash of civilizations in what in fact are three religions connected, should one say, by their shared roots in what Karl Jaspers has much later coined axial time. The question then is, of course, how to engender political, cultural, and social structures across these three religions that would allow us to un-dig these roots, making them visible to large segments of believers, for them not to be seduced by those preaching eternal opposition. While religion in theory could play such a positive role, the reality in history has often been to the detriment of such a reconciliation. It need not to be so, and educational efforts such as this book could be a building block of such a much-needed undertaking.

The same could be said about politics. Political movements, first of all exclusive nationalism, have also again and again delegitimized other groups' political attachment to the land. In the closing pages of the book, Michael Wolffsohn discusses the possibility of federalism as a way forward—distinct from a classical two-state but also a one-state solution. How to institutionalize such a federal perspective in concrete political structures? This is a core impulse stemming from this book, in particular because any working supra-national federalism—think of European integration after World War II—not only established technocratic structures of political cooperation but, more importantly, a sense of shared European political identity from the Netherlands to the Balkan Peninsula and from Scandinavia to Portugal and real ownership of all these countries and people in European integration accepting each other as equals, leveling power asymmetries. National and sub-national identities do

not fade away, but are enriched by this sense of togetherness in diversity. This might, at first sight, be a model hard to conceive of for the Holy Land, let alone the wider Middle East—but for this very reason it is a political objective not less worth fighting for. As European federalists did already one hundred years before, eventually, in the 1950s European integration became a political reality. Questions like these are posed to us on this journey, to which Michael Wolffsohn invites us. This allows also situating the Israeli–Palestinian conflict (and occasional coexistence) in broader historical perspective. That is why this book only partly deals with this modern history of the land in largely the twentieth century. While the reality of this conflict and the religious and national claims for ownership by Israelis and Palestinians are real and relevant today, they play out against a historical background for which the term *longue durée* even seems like a gross understatement. Traveling across the timeline from the dawn of human civilization until today not only helps in nurturing a deeper understanding of distinct forms of attachments. It also nurtures hopes that shared roots, either born but forgotten in history or growing as part of future agreements, might be the real promise the often-heard notion of a "holy" land entails.

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June 2021

About This Book

Whose Holy Land? Today, this question remains a political and historical "evergreen." Power struggles, conflicting interests, and prejudices continue to inflame minds and situations in the Middle East. In order to address such a charged issue, we need to first uncover the roots of the conflicts between Israel and its neighbors and to dispel a number of handed-down myths. With this best-selling book, Michael Wolffsohn has produced a comprehensive and standard work that is essential for any informed discussion about the political situation in the Middle East. Painstakingly researched and easy to read, it examines the historical background of the conflict between Jews and Arabs. It is "highly recommended as a knowledgeable introduction to the controversy over Palestine/Israel" (Schalom Ben-Chorin). 15 editions of this book were released by Piper publishers in Germany between 2002 and 2021; between 1992 and 2001, four editions were published by Bertelsmann and Goldmann.

Michael Wolffsohn

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About the Author

Michael Wolffsohn was born in Tel Aviv to German Jewish parents in 1947, and has lived in Germany since 1954. He received his doctorate in 1975 and completed his postdoctoral degree (*Habilitation*) in 1980. He served as Professor of Modern History at the Bundeswehr University in Munich from 1981 to 2012. His books have been translated into numerous languages.

Holy Land? Israel? Palestine?

What is in a name? Is there more than sound and fury? There certainly is when it comes to the names of people, cities and countries. Depending on whether we use the name "Jerusalem" or "Al Quds" we choose either a Jewish-Israeli or an Arab-Islamic connection. In doing so, we are no longer playing with words but with highly explosive political issues.

Names are intimately tied to history. Two more recent examples: Following the Bolshevik revolution the czarist capital of St. Petersburg became Leningrad—and Leningrad reverted back to St. Petersburg in 1991. The old German city of Chemnitz re-emerged from the ruins of the Second World War as part of the German Democratic Republic and bearing a new name: Karl-Marx-City. The fall of the Wall and of the G.D.R. led to the resurrection of Chemnitz. Names mirror political programs and indicate to victors and vanquished. This also applies to the Holy Land. Is Israel the land of Israel, i.e. the Jewish people? Is Palestine the land of the Palestinians?

"The land" is the simple term employed by the Jews at the end of the period of the Second Temple (also the beginning of the Christian epoch). Of course, we find earlier references to "the land", for example in Leviticus 19:23: "When you come into the land …" and in Joshua 11:23: "So Joshua took the whole land …". The usage here is more that of an abbreviation than of a name. But it also expresses that, though there are many lands on this earth, for the Jews there is only one, "the land of Israel", in Hebrew: *Eretz Yisrael*. In earlier times, the different parts of the land also bore different names. Only in the later period was the term "the land" used, thus establishing a unity among land, people and religion: Israel, Jews and Judaism.

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At the very beginning, the Egyptians of the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries B.C.E. referred to the region as *Retenu*, which included what is today Syria and Lebanon. Later they used the name *Hurru*, which referred to the Hurrians (the Horites of the Bible), a people who had inhabited the region, especially Syria, since the seventeenth century. This designation is to be found as late as Ptolemaic texts of the third century B.C.E.

From the end of the fourteenth until the twelfth century the Egyptians spoke of *P-Knaana*, the land of Canaan. We finally find ourselves on more familiar ground, as this name is known to us from the Bible, where it refers to the lands west of the Jordan in particular and more generally to the western region of Syria. One Canaanite tribe was that of the Amorites and part of the area was also referred to as the "Land of the Amorites."

In searching for references to Jews or Hebrews we thus first encounter of other peoples and other names for various parts of the land.

Peoples come and go. The *Hebrews* came and they included, among others, the Israelites. "For I was stolen out of the land of the Hebrews," reports Joseph in Genesis 40:15.

The so often invoked—and fiercely contested—unity of land, people and religion is a product of the later conquest by the Israelites. The "land of the children of Israel" is mentioned for the first time in Joshua 11:22. It is into this "hill country" that Joshua led the children of Israel, where he eventually, as commanded, drove out or "utterly destroyed" (Joshua 11:20) the people who had lived there before, thus beginning the process of the Jewish conquest of the land.

Eretz Yisrael, the land of Israel, appears for the first time in the first book of Samuel (13:19), but refers only to the area settled by the children of Israel and not to the land as a whole.

As we know from the Bible, Saul, David and Solomon ruled over the *Kingdom of Israel*, but there is a consensus among scholars that the designation "land of Israel" was introduced retroactively for the period of King David (1 Chronicles 22:2 or 2 Chronicles 2:17).

In King David's time the names *Israel* and *Judea* were both applied to the land where the Jews lived. Both names already appear in Joshua (11:21), but Judea refers only to the "hill country". Most scholars regard this as an anticipation, as the land was not divided into *Israel* and *Judea* until after the death of King Solomon.

The confusion of language is thus Jewish-Israelite, not Babylonian. Names are like mirrors. They reflect a certain image of reality. But they are not reality. A multitude of names reflect the historical complications and struggles, the myriad of only incompletely known or ambiguous historical and political

relationships of the region. In view of the hopelessly entangled ambivalancies, only the propagandist will claim clear vision.

In the year 538 B.C.E. the Persian King Cyrus permitted the Jews of Babylonia to return to their land, to *Judea*. For the first time, the words *Jew* and *Hebrew* carry the same meaning. Judea is the land of the Jews, specifically of those Jews who returned to Zion. Since then, Judaism refers to the movement back to the homeland which began in 538 as the "return to Zion".

Zion is the name of the ancient city of the Jebusites now known as Jerusalem. When the Jewish prophets spoke of Zion they always meant Jerusalem as a spiritual and religious symbol. "For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem." (Isaiah 2:3). Finally, in the Jewish Diaspora, that is outside the land of Israel, Zion became the symbol for the Jewish Holy Land.

Zionism, founded in the nineteenth century, was the national movement of the Jewish people. Its goal was the return of the Jewish people to their land, or, more cautiously stated, to the land which the Jewish people regarded as its own. But this jumps over millenniums of history.

From 538 B.C.E. on, Judea was more or less officially the autonomous region inhabited by Jews within the homeland from which they had been taken in captivity first by the Assyrians (in 722) and then by the Babylonians (in 586). In the second century B.C.E. the Jews of Judea, under the Hasmonean dynasty, succeeded in once again establishing an independent state, the Kingdom of Judea. The name survived even under King Herod. This Kingdom of Judea was considerably larger in area than its historical forerunner of the same name which had been extinguished in the Babylonian conquest of 586.

By King Herod's time, the real rulers of Judea were the Romans, against whom the Jews rose up in rebellion. The uprising was in vain. The Jewish rebels were defeated in the year 70 and again, this time disastrously, in 135, after which the Romans abolished even the name of Judea. Emperor Hadrian decreed a new name, *Syria-Palestine*, which soon became shortened to *Palestine*, the land of the Philistines. Everyone who remembers the story of David and Goliath will recall that the giant was a Philistine.

The symbolism chosen by the Romans was unambiguous. In Rome's view, the Jews had forfeited their right to the land. In the course of subsequent centuries, the Byzantine, Arab or Ottoman rulers added or subtracted various areas, but *Palestine* remained substantially intact—until the establishment of the Jewish State. The latter was proclaimed on May 14, 1948, and, as everyone knows, was given the name *Israel*.

Not all of Palestine became Israel. East of the Jordan river, due in part to the instigation of Winston Churchill, the *Emirate of Transjordan* had been

created by a stroke of the pen in 1921. After 1946 it was known as the *Kingdom of Transjordan*. This kingdom took possession of the West Bank region and East Jerusalem in December 1948 and this amalgamation of cis- and trans-Jordanian lands has been subsequently known as the *Kingdom of Jordan*. Except for Great Britain and Pakistan, however, no other nations recognized the Jordanian annexation of the West Bank and Jerusalem. Since the 1967 Six Day War, Israel has occupied both the West Bank and East Jerusalem. The Gaza Strip came under Egyptian administration in 1949, but never formed part of the Egyptian state. In 1967 it came under Israeli occupation until attaining autonomy under the Palestinian Authority in 1994.

Today, the name *Israel* stands for the territory of the Jewish State established in 1948. In 1967, East Jerusalem was formally incorporated into the Jewish State. The Israelis speak of "reunification", the Arabs (and most other states) of "annexation". In 1981 Israel also annexed the area of the Golan Heights occupied since the 1967 war. This act has also not achieved international recognition.

Where does the name *Holy Land* come from? For both Jews and Christians the term expresses reverence and love toward the land. But it has never served as an official designation. For Jews, it is connected with the symbol of Zion as the spiritual and religious center, and augments the concept of the "land". In his Letter to the Hebrews (11:9), the apostle Paul wrote of the "land of promise" which the Lord had pledged to Abraham "as an inheritance".

Muslims revere holy places in this land as well, but as a whole it was never the "Holy Land" of Islam, which, as we shall explore further, has always been oriented to Arabia and the Arabic language. In its origins Islam is "Arabo-centric". The emphasis on Palestine is a result of politics and, from a Muslim viewpoint, is both understandable and justifiable. But, as always, what is "justifiable" is not always automatically right. Usually, the justification is partisan and often serves more to provoke than to inform. This is part of the ritual of conflicts and thus ought to be left to the parties to the conflict. We shall attempt to exclude it from the following presentation.

Part I

Religiosity and Politics

The Pious, the Zealous and a "Dead" God

Whose Holy Land? "Ours, naturally," say Israelis and Jews. "No, ours, of course," reply Arabs and Muslims. "The land is not ours, but it is also holy to us, and we want to have a say regarding access to the holy places," explain Christians.

Are these the answers of the pious or the zealous? Undoubtedly they reflect the convictions of the piously motivated. Religious claims, longings and hopes with regard to the Holy Land are nurtured by Muslims and Christians, and especially by Jews. The bonds between people, religion and *this* land as *"our"* land, the Holy Land, the Promised Land, are clearly most pronounced among the Jews.

Neither Muslims nor Christians claim that it is *their* land, but it is equally evident that this land is indissolubly linked to their own religious history and therefore is also holy to them.

One would assume that those who use religious arguments ought to be religious, but this is all too often not the case. Frequently not piety but zealotry is the wellspring of religious argumentation with regard to the Holy Land. The zealots all too often fail to recognize that one of the purposes of all religion is to protect, not to destroy human life. The biblical fifth commandment is recognized by Jews, Christians and Muslims.

In October of 1991 the Islamic extremist Muslim Brotherhood, which forms the largest single faction in the Jordanian Parliament, and the Islamic fundamentalist Palestinian Hamas movement reiterated their opposition to the peace process and declared "Holy War" against the Jewish State in order to "liberate" Palestine. The view of the Iranian government, even since the passing of the Ayatollah Chomeini, is virtually identical. The pro-Iranian

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fanatics of the Lebanon-based Hisbollah proclaim their intention to drive out the Zionists and to create an Islamic state modeled on the laws of the Quran. When four Hisbollah followers were dispatched into northern Israel in November 1991 their orders were "Shoot as many Jews as possible." Such dire and un-holy tones echo the Third Reich, where people were murdered simply because they were Jews.

We read in the Bible that mankind was created in God's image. Is murder thus to be considered an act of religious liberation? In the final analysis, can God really be alive for those who preach death? The language used is, in any case, anything but secular: "Those who die fighting for the liberation of Palestine will go directly to Paradise." The echo here is that of the European crusaders of the middle ages.

"Holy warriors" have always been something of a plague upon human society, be they Christian Crusaders, Muslim Holy Warriors or Jewish-Israeli settlement fanatics. The latter do not refer to themselves as "holy warriors", but they are similarly convinced of the sacred nature of their mission and are quite prepared to accept that their use of bullets lead to Palestinian casualties.

Of course, we all know that religion can be used to justify rigid positions as well as compromises, but religion is not a viable political instrument or argument. Religion is there to give life moral depth and clarity, not to provoke man into murder and slaughter. Nevertheless, un-holy calamity and destruction have continued to descend upon the Holy Land in the form of countless wars. Sometimes the Holy Land appears to be a microcosm of an un-holy and malevolent world.

It is strange that increasing numbers of people in the Jewish, Islamic and Christian worlds protest that they want little or nothing to do with religion, but yet resort to religion in order to buttress their claim to the Holy Land. "Arab sovereignty must be re-established in the Old City of Jerusalem. Once peace has been re-established, Jerusalem will be the embodiment and the symbol of peace between the followers of the three great monotheistic religions." Thus proclaimed the Foreign Minister of the Kingdom of Jordan, Kamil Abu Jabir, at the Madrid Peace Conference on October 31, 1991. This secular politician (please note: not a cleric) also announced that the fact "that his historic city is so important to all [three religions] is God's will." The source of the Foreign Minister's knowledge was not revealed.

Similar phenomena may be observed on the Jewish side. For decades, around 70% of the Jewish citizens of Israel have responded in the polls that they consider themselves "not religious". Some are even militantly anti-religious and even state that they feel that their rights are being (literally) "violated" by the power of the extreme Orthodox. The non-religious majority

are depriving Judaism of its religious substance. For them, the Jewish religion is nothing more than a superficial shell for the Jewish people. Their ties to "their" land are purely historical. The Jewish claim to the Holy Land is thus being historicized.

While the Arab-Islamic world displays its religious feelings with ever increasing intensity, in Jewish-Israeli society and in great parts of the Christian world—apart from the growing militancy of Orthodox groups—the process of secularization (the increasing distance and alienation from religion) continues.

The secularized Jewish-Israelis are thus undermining the foundation of their own legitimacy. To the extent that the people of the Book cast off their ties to their religious writings and laws, they therewith lose their claim to the Land of the Bible, their Holy Land, their Promised Land. They stand naked before the Arabs. The Jewish claim becomes "historicized" and, like all things historical, is no longer absolute, unchallenged and unchallengeable, but is relativized and opened to challenge. The modern, predominantly non-religious majority of Jewish Israelis are thus forced to steer a precarious course between fundamentalist orthodoxy and complete secularization.

Distance and alienation from religious roots provoke counter-reactions. *God's Revenge* is the title of a book by Gilles Kepel which appeared in 1991. Its subtitle: "Radical Muslims, Christians and Jews on the March". Certainly, fundamentalists are attracting more and more followers among Jews, Muslims and Christians. But have they really succeeded in reversing—or even slowing—the process of secularization which they so greatly fear? We may be permitted to doubt. Secularization continues inexorably, at least in the realms of technology and organization, less so in the intellectual-cultural sphere.

Perhaps religious fundamentalism is merely an offensive tactic in a defensive strategy. In the last two centuries the Jewish, Islamic and Christian worlds have witnessed many comparable actions and reactions. We may continue to view the theory of the offensive defense as valid until such time as it is conclusively disproved.

Fundamentalism: A Shield for the Culture?

The reason for the apparently irresistible advance of the religious fundamentalists is to be found in their attempt to re-establish religious and therewith cultural autonomy. The goal is autonomy in an increasingly standardized and homogenized world. This is a motive familiar to both the Jewish and Islamic worlds.

From the very beginning, Judaism, like Islam, was intent upon setting itself apart. The Prophet Mohammed nurtured close contacts with Jews and Christians, but as the founder of a religion he also had to create a distance between his and the other religions—even if the intention was not at all hostile. There were also political reasons. In Mohammed's time, Christianity was the religion of the Byzantine Empire and Judaism, with its center in Mesopotamia, was closely connected with Persian interests. Islam recommended itself, so to speak, as the bloc-free alternative.

Today's world is increasingly patterned after "Western", i.e. European-American civilization, or so it appears to many Islamic, Jewish and Christian fundamentalists, who are confused and feel threatened by what they perceive as a predominantly materialistic and technological civilization. They feel that their very spirits and souls are at peril. In their eyes, "Western" civilization is an assault on their culture, of which their religion is an inseparable part. To them, modern civilization represents a torrent of homogenized cultural swill which must be contained. Fundamentalism is one of their flood walls.

Culture concerns essentials, defines being itself. Civilization organizes and regulates the form of existence. Fundamentalists live in a polarity between

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