

Jebusites

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Abu Mazen is at it again. Claiming at the UN that Palestinians are descended from Jebusites. Yasir Arafat, Faisal Husseini and others before him, have all claimed that Palestinians are descended from the Canaanite tribe of the Jebusites. The 1978 *Al-Mawsu'at Al-Filastinniya* (Palestinian encyclopedia) asserted, "The Palestinians [are] the descendants of the Jebusites, who are of Arab origin", and described Jerusalem as "an Arab city because its first builders were the Canaanite Jebusites, whose descendants are the Palestinians." Which is interesting in itself because the very term Arab, used as early as 800 BCE in Assyrian texts, applied only to inhabitants of the deserts of Arabia. Not hill country such as the West Bank.

Such declarations should not surprise. History is political. Many Middle Eastern cultures and states retroactively claim roots to the ancient tribes and empires in order to legitimize their modern nationalism. For instance, the Lebanese claim descent from the Phoenicians, Iraqis from the Babylonians, Kurds from the Medians, and Turks from the Hittites.

I am not one of those who claim that the justification for a Jewish State is a Biblical promise. My justification is based on a documented historical, cultural and ideological association between a religious and culturally identifiable people and the land of Israel under whatever name it has had over time. Neither am I concerned with any notions of genetic purity. Rather self-declared Jews of connected variations over thousands of years (admittedly all arguing with each other over legitimacy).

There is a link between Jerusalem and Jebusites. As there is between Jerusalem and Neanderthals. The name of Jerusalem predates the city's appearance in Jewish history. Ancient texts such as the Egyptian texts (2000-1900 B.C.E.) refer to the city as Rushalimum. The word Jerusalem becomes more recognizable in a series of letters from around 1400 B.C.E. attributed to scribes acting on behalf of King Abdi-Hepa of Urusalim. Someone inhabited the ancient site of Jerusalem, perhaps as early as 3200 B.C.E. and there is reference to Yabusu, an old form of Jebus, on a contract tablet that dates from 2200 B.C.E.

The first mention of the Jebusites in the Bible occurs as Genesis lists the offspring of Noah. Here, they are counted as direct descendants of a man named Canaan, Noah's grandson. The one he cursed for humiliating him. But then so were the Sidonites, Amorites, Hivites, Arkites, Sinites, Arvadites, Zemarathies and Hamatites (Genesis 10.15). Perhaps Abu Mazen is descended from the Sinites. In which case he is welcome to Sinai.

Then in Exodus, as the Jews look to move to the land of Canaan that was promised to their patriarch Abraham, they were expected to "drive out" the Jebusites and other tribes from the Promised Land. In Deuteronomy, God orders the Jews to destroy completely "the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites,

the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations more numerous and mightier than yourselves,” and forbids intermarriage with them. Yet in fact the Israelites never succeeded in getting rid of them then. During the period of the Judges, the Canaanites actually conquered the Israelites until Deborah and Barak fought back.

In the book of Judges, Israel is recorded as disobeying the order to completely annihilate the Jebusites who have committed “abominations” before God, and the book relates how the Jebusites continued to mix with the sons of Benjamin in Jerusalem. Jews and Jebusites seem to have co-existed in Israel as late as the eleventh century B.C.E. In 966 B.C.E. when King David conquered Jebus and made it his capital, Jerusalem. There is no mention of the Jebusites’ total annihilation. But neither is there any other mention of them elsewhere. No artefacts or documents. We do know that the Assyrian kings in the eighth century drove out and into captivity all the tribes of Canaan except the Judeans (who later fell to the Babylonians). And that was where any remaining Jebusites or Canaanites however you want to call them, ended up. Like our own “lost” Ten Northern Tribes of Israel.

The Christian narrative continues into the New Testament, using the more general rubric of the Canaanites. In Matthew 15:22, a Canaanite woman approaches Jesus because her daughter is possessed by a demon. Craig Blomberg, professor of New Testament at Denver Seminary, argues that Matthew picked the word “Canaanite” in order to conjure up images of past Canaanite evils. But the term Canaanite is used in the Prophets to describe merchants and aliens in general without being genetically specific. And as Christians see themselves as having taken over the mantle of the children of Israel, they too lay claim to the Holy Land and have a much more impressive case than the Jebusites.

There is no archaeological evidence to support the claim of Jebusite-Palestinian continuity. The general consensus exists among historians and archeologists that modern Palestinians are “more closely related to the Arabs of Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Jordan, and other countries” than to the Jebusites, and that they lack any significant connection to them. The late Johns Hopkins University Professor William Albright questioned “the surprising tenacity” of “the myth of the unchanging East” and rejected any assertion of continuity between the “folk beliefs and practices of the modern peasants and nomads” and “pre-Arab times.”

Most Palestinians have genetic identities that are more Turkish, Iraqi or Egyptian than specifically Palestinian or Canaanite! I am not suggesting that all Jews can trace their genes back to the Land of Israel. Obviously there have been conversions, rapes and admixtures. The issue is not the specific person so much as the association of a culture and heritage with the land. Conquest is not the issue. Almost every power has conquered Israel at some stage. The Arabs are rather latecomers compared to the Jews. They only arrived some twelve hundred years ago.

It would make much more sense for the Palestinians to claim they are descended from the Hittites. But then they might offend the obnoxious Erdogan in Turkey where the Hittites originated. Even if we know from Abraham, that

the Hittites owned the Cave of Mahpela in Hebron before Abraham bought it.

Under the Ottomans the land of Israel, the Roman named province of Palestine, the Holy Land whatever you want to name it, all these terms were in current use. Jewish migrants came and went as circumstances allowed. After the expulsion from Spain it became a hub of Jewish mystical life with giants such as Moses Cordovero, Isaac Luria and Hayim Vital. At one time in the eighteenth century they made up half the population of Jerusalem, Hebron, Safed and Tiberius. In the eighteenth century waves of Ashkenazi Hassidim found their way to Jerusalem, Tiberius and Safed long before anyone had heard of Zionism.

None of this means that current Palestinians of whatever origin or any non-Jewish migrants should have no rights or are wrong to fight for self-determination. History as I have said is political. But to tell lies or to mislead is simply deceitful. And ultimately self-destructive because history does have a way of turning up the truth eventually. And I promise to retract if Abu Mazen can produce any evidence to contradict me.

PS. Some of the facts in this piece have been taken from Palestinians, Jebusites, and Evangelicals: David Wenkel *Middle East Quarterly* Summer 2007, pp. 49-56

(<http://www.meforum.org/1713/palestinians-jebusites-and-evangelicals>)