

Revisiting *The Invention of Ancient Israel* **Interview with Norman K. Whitelam**

ARIADNA GUIMERÀ MARTÍNEZ
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

The Biblical Minimalism has become one of the most suggestive and refreshing historiographical proposals in the Biblical Studies of the last decades. It is also known as the Copenhagen School, because of two of its most prominent investigators –Thomas L. Thompson and Niels Peter Lemche– come from there. There is an academic occidental tendency that defends the necessity to rewrite the Ancient History of Palestine. Born in the 90's, this historiographical inclination has two principal claims. First of all, it is looking for decreasing the use of the Bible as a main source to study this period; and secondly, to reduce the historical controversy of Israel's territory. Having been self-proclaimed as a non-national and objective-scientific proposal, this European scholarship has as many adepts as detractors in their ranks.

One of the most important and polemic works in this movement is *The Invention of Ancient Israel: The Silencing of Palestinian History*, by Norman K. Whitelam. Professor and Head of the Department of Biblical Studies at Sheffield University since 1978, Whitelam has focused all his entire investigation on Palestine's past and ancient biblical history, becoming one of the most relevant international researchers in this topic. In addition, he is the author of more than twenty scholarly monographs and fifty articles. Furthermore, he is also the joint editor of the prestigious *Journal for Old Testament Studies* and the Routledge series *Readings in the Old Testament*.

In this interview, Whitelam talks about the reception of his book, which was selected by Edward W. Said as the book of the year for 1996 in the British TLS. Did he achieve the construction of a new Ancient History in Palestine? Does the Israel State make a systematic nationalization of archaeologies? Has biblical minimalism succeed its goals and overcome the problems? These are the Whitelam's answers.

The publication of your book The Invention of Ancient Israel: The Silence of Palestinian History in 1996 marked a significant turning point in the history of Palestinian people studies. I wanted to ask if you think that there have been any other substantial works or contributions since then. If yes, would you indicate those that deserve more relevance?

There are a number of people who have addressed some of the same issues such as the so-called minimalists (Niels Peter Lemche, Thomas L. Thompson, Philip R. Davies) or recently Emmanuel Pfoh. But I don't know of a history of Palestine that moves from ancient past to the present. Ilan Pappé's *A History of Modern Palestine: One Land, Two Peoples* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) is an important work but it focuses on the modern period. Again, another work dealing with the modern period is B. Doumani's work. It is also very important but again has a modern focus (*Rediscovering Palestine: Merchants and Peasants in Jabal Nablus, 1700-1900*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995; "Rediscovering Ottoman Palestine: Writing Palestinians into History", in I. Pappé (ed.), *The Israel/Palestine Question*, London: Routledge, 1999: 11-40).

The key problem that I think that needs to be addressed is the construction of Palestine from ancient past to the present as a unified narrative. Most works either focus on the past or suggest that Palestine begins in the 19th or 20th centuries. They do not tie the narratives together. I tried to suggest in *Rhythms of Time: Reconnecting Palestine's Past* (2013) how this might be done but again it is a programmatic sketch not a history. Hopefully, younger scholars will pursue that task since I think it is an urgent political and social task.

You are dealing in The Invention of Ancient Israel with the need to claim the history of the Palestinian "silent majority", understood as those Arab inhabitants (peasants, merchants, artisans, etc.) whose origin goes back to the Bronze Age. It explains the existence of a silenced history of the Palestinian people by the State of Israel and the Western academic community. I would like to know if you consider that the Palestinians history is still silenced.

Yes. In fact, if anything, I think that the situation is worse than when I first addressed the issues. As the political situation has worsened for Palestinians, the issues of history and culture of the region have been ignored in western media and academically. Although I have not kept a close eye on the field since my retirement, my impression has been that scholars in my own field (apart from a very few) have refused to engage with the issues. The charges of anti-Semitism have effectively frightened off many scholars. The Israeli government's view of the past as belonging to ancient and modern Israel is largely unchallenged in the media or much of scholarship as far as I can see.

In your work you propose a new narrative that takes into account other people of the region, not just Israel. For this reason, in order to create this new history, should we start from a scratch, without looking at the contemporary facts, or should we bear in mind all these events?

It is impossible to ignore contemporary facts since they colour the way in which the past has been constructed and represented. One of the main points that I was trying to make was that unless we examined carefully the contemporary shaping of history, it would be impossible to offer an alternative narrative. I think that such an analysis has to be constant in order to try to present an alternative reading of the past. My focus has been on Palestine in general and how particular periods, rather than being unique, fit into the rhythms and patterns of its history.

Do you consider that the State of Israel is erasing all the archaeological and historical evidence of the Palestinian people to eliminate the collective identity of the Palestinians? What do you think about the archaeological projects that are carried out by the University of Jerusalem?

I think that there has been a long-term strategy from mapping through the writing of history to erase Palestine's past. It is an essential part of their strategy to remove any idea of an alternative history to the one that is officially projected and which is used to justify their claims on the land and treatment of the Palestinians. Archaeology is a political tool and has been used to underpin these claims. Work in Jerusalem in recent years, funded by right wing settler groups is a case in point. But I think we need to examine carefully all archaeological excavations not just those that are more transparently ideological. There are number of Israeli archaeologists who I admire as scholars, who are well aware of many of the issues and who work in very difficult circumstances.

The use of archaeological results from many of the excavations is a difficult issue: they are illegal under international law. I have been criticised for using much of this research in my own work. The problem is that these excavations often represent the only data we have for particular periods in Palestine's past. I believe that they have to be treated critically and the political assumptions that have guided the excavations and reporting of the data exposed. It is the reinterpretation of the data that I think is important.

Throughout the book appears a permanent reinforcement to the ethnicity of the Arab people who lived and live in Palestine. In fact, the last chapter entitled "Reclaiming Palestinian History" points out the need to construct a history from antiquity to the present day of the Palestinian people. What tips would you give

for building Palestine's history? Should we omit all the information provided by the Bible?

The Bible is an important source and so cannot be eliminated. But it needs to be read critically rather than used as it has been in western scholarship as a history book that only needs retelling. Those periods covered by the Bible are only a very small part of the history of Palestine. They need to be set in a much wider context, i.e. the millennia long history of the region to show that they are not unique. My last book (*The Rhythms of Time*) is my view of how this should be done. It is not looking at unique events, individuals, etc. but at the long-term trends in the region. So, the period that is usually represented as the monarchy of David and Solomon, for instance, is represented as part of the long-term trends where different towns in the region have been prominent and then declined in later periods. It is this type of history that I think is important for trying to represent an alternative history of Palestine and its peoples.

The book is short, was published as an e-book and has been largely ignored. But it was important for me as a way to suggest how I think the history should be approached. I have attached a copy for you since it addresses most of the questions that you have asked me.

There is some controversy about the language used in your work. The debate revolves around certain qualifications such as "colonization and occupation" to refer to Jewish immigration of the 19th and the 20th centuries; or the term "colonizers" when talking about the Jews who came from Russia and the rest of Europe to Palestine at the end of the 19th century, among others. Likewise, not only do they refer to the language but also to the content of the book as a nationalist Palestinian proposal. What is your attitude towards these reviews?

Many reviews I read failed to understand the book and others were opposed to it because they didn't agree with my basic thesis that the representation of Palestine's ancient past within biblical studies was not objective. The attack on the facade of objectivity which many scholars see as their unique achievement was not welcome. The book was also a critique of all nationalist representations of the past.

The charges of anti-Semitism by some, I simply rejected. My usual response has been 'show me one quotation from the book or give me a page number and show me what is anti-Semitic about anything I have written'. I am still waiting for someone to supply a quotation or page number.

It has been very controversial the use of the concept "Palestinian people" which you refer to as a permanent entity throughout history. Some reviews consider that

this evaluation should only be used in contemporary times from the 19th century on. What could you say about it?

I chose the term very deliberately to highlight the problems with the ways in which Palestine's past has been represented in scholarship. I used 'Palestinian' as a regional term (the inhabitants of Palestine), rather than a specifically ethnic one to connect the past to the present. One of the points I made was that scholars were happy to talk about ancient Palestine, a Palestinian economy, a Palestinian coastline: all inanimate objects. They refused to label the inhabitants of the area as Palestinian. I wanted to show that the ancient past flows into the present and that there were important connections. I also wanted to raise the debate about ethnic labels, especially the ways in which 'Israelite' had become all encompassing and was used to tie the past to Israel's present. I also wanted to attack the ludicrous label 'pre-Israelite' which was also being used to claim that past for modern-day Israel.

Your work fits in the historiographical tendency of Biblical minimalism. Therefore, its proposal is designated as a Postcolonial theory whilst trying to establish a historical and political analysis of a culture colonized and dominated by the West. It is a trend that was born and survives among academics of the first world countries and it is sometimes perceived as a paternalistic guide on how Palestinians should relate to their past. Do you agree with this statement? Would you consider that any academic proposal that has been made from the West concerning the historical study of the Palestinian Arab people is paternalistic / colonialist?

I think my work is significantly different to the other so-called minimalists. But yes, I was always aware of the dangers of my western perspective and how it would appear as paternalistic/colonialist/condescending. I was though addressing a largely western audience—biblical scholars and archaeologists—and analysing how they/we had constructed the ancient past, particularly within biblical studies. Very few people if any, whether Western or not, were addressing the specific issue of how biblical studies had constructed the past in the image of western nation states. One of my principal guiding lights was Edward Said and I hoped that following his work on orientalist and subsequent studies that I had done the best I could by trying to be aware as far as possible of my own western upbringing and perspectives.

One small anecdote: I was approached at one academic conference by a Palestinian scholar who said to me that I had done my job, but it was his history and he would take over now. My reply was that I was happy if he pursued his own

history but it was still subject to the same critical canons of scholarship as any other. I retained the right to critique his reconstruction of history as I did any others.

Before finishing I wanted to mention that there are some other ethnic groups which had entered a conflict in the contemporary time as well. Nevertheless, most of them have been forgotten due to the lack of research about them. Hence, I wanted to ask why do you believe that the study of Palestine's history deserves especial attention.

Since I was trained as a biblical scholar and became primarily interested in the history of ancient Israel and archaeology, it was my interest in how history is reconstructed and the ends that it serves in contemporary society that led me to address the question of Palestine's history and the ways in which it had been represented in western scholarship. That doesn't mean that I am not interested in other histories that have been silenced. They are part of a wider study. Palestine's history, however, was important for me as I explored how it was affected by contemporary issues from Britain's involvement in the Middle East, through the Balfour Declaration, the founding of the modern state of Israel and how the representation of the past fed into contemporary western politics.