

The Land Of Purple

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The lexeme “Israel” has become an extremely loaded term in the post-War era. After having undergone an onomastic metamorphosis over time, it has become especially fraught with hermeneutic quandaries. To what, exactly, does it refer? As it turns out, the answer to this has changed from one epoch to the next.

We might begin our inquiry, then, with a review of the tract of land with which the label is most associated: the Levant. In archaic times, that region was variously referred to as:

- **“Kinahhu” / “Kinahni”** (Akkadian / Assyrian)
- **“Ka-na-na[-um]”** (Eblaite / Ugaritic)
- **“K[a]na’an”** (Phoenician)
- **“Kn’n”** (Old Aramaic)

The moniker meant “Land of Purple” in Hittite / Hurrian.

The term appears in Amorite inscriptions not only at Ebla and Ugarit, but at Mari in Mesopotamia as well. Those attestations were from the early 2nd millennium B.C. {30} Not coincidentally, this is also what “phoinike” meant in Ancient Greek—a lexeme that served as the basis for another familiar moniker: “Phoenicia”. (Note: “phoinike” was also the etymological source for “Phoenix” , brother of Europa: the Phoenician princess who hailed from Tyre.)

Throughout ancient times, this particular color was often correlated with sacredness; and would later be the basis for the Judaic use of “tekhelet” in religious garments (a color designation that was rendered “hyacinthos” in the Septuagint). The color “hyacinth” corresponded to the gemstone as well as the flower by that name. In Mycenaean mythology, hyacinth was associated with the homosexual hero, Hyakinthos—who later played an integral role in both Etruscan and Spartan lore.

But why purple? This distinct color was also associated with the Phoenician city of “Sur[ru]” (later rendered “Tyre”) which was known for the dye of that distinct—and highly coveted—pigment. (Hence the renown of “Tyrian Purple”, which—like “tekhelet” for the Hebrews—was correlated with exalted status.) Tyre came to play a prominent role in Greek myths about Heracles. The city’s tutelary god was “Ba’al Sur” [god of Tyre] (a.k.a. “M-L-K Q-R-T”; meaning “king of the city”): a dying-then-rising deity who symbolized resurrection / re-birth.

Meanwhile, the archaic term for Phoenicia (“Lebanon”) came from another color: the Phoenician term for “white”: “L-B-N” (often rendered “labonah”; which eventually came to be used to refer to the coveted spice, frankincense). The Hebrew Bible regularly uses the moniker, “L-B-N-N”, presumably based on the Babylonian Aramaic (the script of which is a derivative of Phoenician).

Throughout Classical Antiquity, Greek sources refer to ALL residents of the region-in-question as “Phoenicians”—that is: people of “**Phoinike**” (even as Phoenicians themselves simply referred to the region as “**Kana’an**”). That Phoenicians opted for the Canaanite moniker was taxonomically unproblematic, as—either way—its meaning was “Land of Purple”.

Other Greeks referred to the land as “**Palaistine**”—as with the era’s most renown historian, Herodotus (who referred to the region as such in his “Histories”). That was in the early 5th century B.C. (during the Exilic Period). THIS label continued to be used through Classical Antiquity—as demonstrated by the Athenian geographer, Polemon of Ilium AND by the Ptolemaic geographer, Agatharchides of Knidos—both of whom wrote in the latter half of the 2nd century B.C. (the time of the ascendancy of the Hasmoneans). Herodotus would have likely derived that moniker from an alternate Assyrian term for the region, “**Pala-ashtu**”. For THAT had been the term used by Assyrian king Adad-nirari III—as attested by the Nimrod Slab and the Saba’a Stele c. 800 B.C. “Pala-ashtu” seems to have also been widely used throughout Classical Antiquity. But where did THAT come from?

Since at least as far back as the 12th century B.C., the Egyptians had referred to the PEOPLE who lived in the Levant as the “**P-L-S-T**”...even as they referred to the REGION as “**Retjenu**” (as attested by inscriptions on the temple at Madinet Habu). It is possible that the Egyptian references to “**Peleset**” may have pertained to the group that came to be called the “Philistines”. This would be the basis for the aforesaid moniker used by the Greeks (which was later Romanized to “**Philisti[n]a**” / “**Palaestina[e]**”).

The term “Peleset” continued to be used by the Egyptians into the 9th century B.C., when it appeared in an inscription on the statue of Pa-di-iset, son of Apy. Tellingly, ALSO used in that inscription was the moniker, “Canaan”...as everyone seemed to know the region-in-question as the Land of Purple.

It was during the 8th century B.C. that the Assyrian moniker seems to have been slightly modified. In 735 B.C., “**Pala-ashtu**” was still being used—as evidenced in a letter addressed to Tiglath-Pileser. Yet in 717 B.C. it occurred as “**Palistu**” on a tablet describing the military campaigns of Sargon II. And then (c. 700 B.C.) it occurred as “**Pilista’a**” on a tablet describing the military campaign of Sennacherib against Hezekiah. By the 7th century, the term had been rendered “**Pilisti**”—as it occurs in the treaty between Esarhaddon and a ruler known under the regnal name: Ba’al of Tyre (c. 675 B.C.)

Suffice to say: This moniker has a very, very long history.

It should come as no surprise, then, that the Torah repeatedly refers to the tract of land west of the Jordan river as “Kena’an” (the term is used 57 times), most famously in Genesis 17:8 and Deuteronomy 32:47. It was originally the land of Amorites and Phoenicians—boasting archaic Semitic city-States like Ugarit and Ebla (wherein the earliest Semitic scripts are attested).

The land to the EAST of the Jordan river was “Aram” in the north; the rest was comprised of “Ammon” and “Moab”. That region was alternately dubbed “Karkor” in Biblical Hebrew (depending on the context / writer). The Greco-Roman terms for that area included Hauran, Per[a]jia, and Batan[a]jia (which constitute present-day Jordan). Medieval Talmudic writers referred to it vaguely as “Gilead”. It was originally the land of the Aramaeans—who were effectively Syro-Hittites.

Meanwhile: Phoenicia (present-day Lebanon) was called “Amurru” by the Amorites, “Aram Zoba” in the Hebrew Bible, and “Itur[a]ia” by the Greco-Romans. The southern Levant was variously referred to as “Idum[a]ea” (a variant on “Edom”), “Arabia Petr[a]ea”, and “Pal[a]estinae Salutaris”. {30}

In sum: Throughout ancient times, the term “Israel” is never used to refer to a tract of land (i.e. in the manner we find in the reified catch-phrase “eretz [y]Israel”). Everywhere the moniker is used, it is not a place, it is a people. In terms of a territorial designation, “Israel” is only used (11 times) to reference the pagan kingdom located in “Shomron” (Samaria). In THOSE cases, the appellation it was used disparagingly, as THAT kingdom was not Jewish. It clearly was NOT being used in the same way that it was used to reference (the seed of) Jacob: “Yisra-El”.

Prior to the Exilic Period (when the earliest elements of Judaic lore were first being formulated), the pagan kingdom in northern Canaan (that is: the Kingdom of “Israel”) was referred to as the “Bit Humri[a]” [House of Omri]—as attested by the Black Obelisk of Assyrian King Shalmaneser III (at Kalhu) from the 9th century B.C. {1} We might also note the commemoration of the victory of Pharaoh Shoshenq [rendered “Shishak” in Hebrew] over King Rehoboam c. 925 on the Bubastite Portal gate at Karnak, which employs the same semiotic scheme.

So yes, at one point there was, indeed, a (misleadingly named) KINGDOM OF “Israel”. Ask most people today whether that kingdom was pagan or Jewish, and most will answer (incorrectly) “Jewish”. The Jewish kingdom was the Kingdom of Judah to the south (in Judea). This is why the original symbol of the Jewish people was known as the “Lion of Judah”, not as the “Lion of Israel”. {2}

Alas, the fabled Davidic / Solomonic epoch (of a unified Abrahamic kingdom) is likely more farce than history—a “just so story” that would serve as a national founding myth. But, for the sake of argument, let’s assume it existed EXACTLY as it did in the Hebrew Bible. EVEN THEN, we read that King Solomon honored pagan gods—including Ashtoreth, Shamash, and Molech (ref. First Kings 11).

By the time the last king of the northern kingdom (Hoshea) usurped the throne (as a vassal to Assyria) in 732 B.C., the Assyrian king at the time (Tiglath-Pileser III) gloated about that king’s submission—STILL referring to the kingdom as “Bit Humri[a]”. This would have all been rather strange had the established moniker been “Israel”.

Thereafter, the Assyrian kings referred to northern Canaan as “Shomron” [Romanized to “Samaria”] and sometimes as the House / Land of Omri; not as “Israel”. Why? Because “Israel” referred to the diaspora of the sons of Isaac (spec. of Jacob); i.e. the Jewish people, who happened to be scattered across the Middle East. Meanwhile, “Shomron” was the accepted name of northern Canaan in Judaic lore—as attested in, say, First Kings 20:34. (We continue to find it in Christian lore—as in Luke 17:11-20 and Acts 8:2.) Indeed, the Judaic off-shoot sect known as the “Shomronim” [Romanized to “Samaritans”] were named after this land from which they hailed. It was THERE that the (pagan) Kingdom of Israel was located—most notably under Omri, then Ahab, then Ahaziah. (Note the tales of the prophet, Elijah.)

And so it went: When it came to labeling the pagan kingdom in Samaria, “Israel” seems to have been a post-hoc convention. The archeological record bears this out. When it WAS used, it referred to the non-Jewish kingdom (which was in the north), not to the Jewish kingdom (which was in the south).

Throughout Classical Antiquity, the Greeks continued to refer to the northern part of the region (present-day Lebanon and Syria) as “Phoinike” (i.e. Phoenicia). The northeastern part of the region was sometimes referred to as “Aram[ea]” (i.e. Land of the Aramaeans) due to its inhabitants at the time (essentially a band of Syro-Hittites).

The Land of Purple was under the rule of the Assyrians (operating out of Nineveh) between the late 8th century B.C. and the late 7th century B.C...at which time it fell under the control of the Babylonians (c. 612 B.C.) {3} It was in the 6th century, during their time in Babylon, that the Jewish scribes composed the earliest sacred texts (in Babylonian Aramaic). Again, the Aramaic moniker for the land was “Canaan”.

The Exilic Period was a propitious period for precisely this reason: It was at THAT juncture that Judaic doctrine was formally codified. (Psalm 137 begins: “By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and wept.” Obviously, that was written by Babylonian scribes during the Exilic Period, NOT by King David four centuries earlier.) However, the canonical texts would not be finalized until the Council of Jamnia in the late 1st century A.D.; and the Mishnah not until almost c. 200 A.D.

Those who make spurious claims about Judaism (and/or the Jewish people) being anything more than 26 centuries old mistake a timeline specified IN JUDAIC LORE with the timing of JUDAISM ITSELF. In other words, the etiological myth was made official at one time (the 6th century B.C.) even as it REFERS TO events that occurred in the 2nd millennium B.C. (from Abraham...through Exodus...all the way to King David). {19} Note that if we were to use the same cockamamie heuristic for Jainism, we could say that that Faith was TRILLIONS of years old. {31}

Originally, “Israel” (as used in the moniker “Beit Yisra-El”; alt. “Beth Israel”) was an ethnonym, not the name of a land. That is to say: It was simply the moniker for a group of people—wherever they happened to be located. Specifically, “Israel” referred to those who, in one way or another, affiliated themselves with the Mosaic creed. It encompassed all of those who associated themselves in some pertinent way with Judaic lore (namely: the Hebrews). Hence the moniker was not the name for a particular piece of real estate; it was the name for a diaspora. {4}

This is illustrated in Deuteronomy 6:4-9, 20:3, and 27:9, in which Yahweh addresses his tribe thus: “Sh’ma Yisra-El” [Hear, O Israel]. Needless to say, the Abrahamic deity was not addressing a tract of land. According to the Biblical narrative, the “seed of Israel” (i.e. the progeny of Abraham’s son, Isaac, via Jacob) existed wherever Hebrews happened to be—even in distant lands (most notably, in Egypt and Mesopotamia). {7} This is in keeping with Exodus 4:22-23, wherein the Abrahamic deity declared that “Israel” is “my son, my first-born” (that is: “my progeny”). This was clearly not referring to a tract of land. This is also in keeping with Hosea 11:1, where “Israel” is equated with the anointed “son” (i.e. progeny of Jacob). When Moses was addressing his fellow Hebrews at Sinai (ref. Genesis 10:16), he referred to “your brethren” as “the whole of Israel”.

The fact that not all of Abraham's descendants were "Israel" (only the descendants of Isaac qualified as such) would be emphasized later in Paul's letter to the Romans (9:6-7). This cadre of people could be even more narrowly defined as the people of Judah—a qualification that referred more to subjects of a certain (Judaic) kingdom than to progeny of a particular person.

And that was nomenclature used for much Classical Antiquity....and on through Late Antiquity. "Israel" referred to a people, not a place. {6} Such terminology was standard. As Shlomo Sand put it: "In the uprising of the Jewish communities [against the Romans, during the Kitos War c. 115-117], which Zionist historiography refers to as 'the revolt of the diaspora' in order to emphasize its imagined 'national' focus, we find no longing for a return to an ancestral land, no trace of loyalty or connection to a faraway land of origin." As we shall see, this continued to be the case throughout the Middle Ages.

Tellingly, the "House of Israel" was used in the same manner as the House of Isaac (as in Amos 7:16)...or more specifically as the "House of Jacob" (as in Isaiah 2:5-6)...or even more specifically as the "House of David" (as in Isaiah, chapter 9). That is: It was used as a way of addressing the Jewish people of the world, regardless of where they were located.

When the intent was to reference a PLACE the terminology was always different. In the event that the people-in-question lived in Canaan, the term "Canaan" was used (as in Genesis 17:7-8). When referring to the pagan (northern) portion of Canaan, it was "Shomron" (alt. "Samaria"). When referring to the Judaic (southern) portion of Canaan, it was "Yehud[ah]" (alt. "Jud[a]ea"). {9} This was the case long before there was a united KINGDOM OF "Israel". Note that yet another term used for the region-in-question was "Abar-Nahara" (Aramaic)...based on the Akkadian / Assyrian "Ebir-Nari". (Later, that would be rendered "Aber-Nahra" in Syriac.)

Meanwhile, "Beth-El" [House of God] referred to an actual structure—first a tent ("tabernacle"), and then a small temple—in which it was believed the Abrahamic deity LITERALLY DWELLED. As it happened, "Beth-El" corresponded to a certain location: Luz...which was the place where the Canaanites worshipped their godhead, "El". That explains why it is referenced at the beginning of the 35th chapter of Genesis. According to the tale, the Abrahamic deity instructed Abraham's grandson, Jacob ben Isaac (a.k.a. "Yisra-El") to settle at "Beth-El" and erect an altar. This "Beth-El" eventually came to be associated with the city of David (Jerusalem); yet it was not necessarily INITIALLY located there (a matter I explore in my essay on Jerusalem).

Note that the focus was initially on Isaac's son, Jacob; and by implication: on Jacob's (patriarchal) lineage. In Genesis 32:25-33, Jacob was re-named "Yisra-El" (as the patriarch of the chosen people) during an encounter with the Abrahamic deity—or an emissary thereof—on the banks of the river Jabbok. This moniker was taken to mean "one who strives / struggles with god". {10} In other words, "Israel" was the euphemism for Jacob; and, by implication, for Jacob's bloodline via Leah and Rachel (but NOT his bloodline via Zilpah or Bilah). This bloodline is also dubbed "B'nei Yisra-El" (sons / children of the one who struggles with god). Such nomenclature is found in Genesis 22:18 and 48:18-19, when Joseph explains that Jacob's seed shall become a people. The same nomenclature is employed when Joshua juxtaposes the Amorites with "the children of Yisra-El" (10:12).

That nomenclature persisted for the remainder of the Torah. In Numbers 23, Jacob's descendants are equated with "the seed of Israel" (that is: the progeny of Jacob). In Numbers 24, "Israel" is "encamped, tribe by tribe" in the Judean countryside. Numbers 15:38 makes clear that the Jewish people are the ancestors of "Yisra-El" (Jacob ben Isaac ben Abraham). Clearly, "Israel" had nothing to do with a particular location. It was a bloodline. (Note that another appellation for "Israel" included the poetic "Jeshurun", as in Deuteronomy 32:15.)

Throughout the Torah, after the scene where Jacob is re-anointed after having wrestled with god (or with an angelic proxy thereof), "Israel" is synonymous with "Jacob" (i.e. Jacob's seed). So when Gideon speaks with the Abrahamic deity about his people (who were being starved because the Midianites were stealing their grain), the term is used thus:

God: "Save Israel from the Midianites; am I not the one who is sending you?"

Gideon: "How shall I be the one to save Israel?" (Judges 6:12-15)

Such usage is in keeping with passages like, say, Micah 1:5.

In passages like Micah 5:3, it is said that those who have strayed from the Faith will return to THE PEOPLE OF "Israel"—that is: return to the fold of Abrahamic monotheism. The same locution is used in Second Chronicles 6:6. This was not about returning to a particular tract of land. For if that had been the case, it would have read: return to the "Land of Promise" (as in Genesis 32:1-2) or return to the "land of Canaan" (as in Genesis 17:7-8 and Exodus 15:15).

When the phrase "eretz Israel" was eventually used (in the Book of Ezekiel), it simply meant a place that has been bequeathed to an anointed people (ref. 18:2 and 37:12); and could have been ANYWHERE. It could just as well have been referred to as "eretz Jacob" [i.e. the land belonging to (the seed of) Jacob]. In other words, it pertained to the land that god "gave to Jacob" [alt. to "Israel"] (ref. 37:25)...wherever that might have been. The key to understanding this phraseology is the Biblical use of "eretz". Normally interpreted as "land", its original meaning was WORLD (alt. EARTH). In a sense, the Abrahamic deity sought to give the known world to his chosen people; and—pursuant to the Flood—sought to make ALL MANKIND "Beth Israel". It makes sense, then, that in the Hebrew Bible, the promised land was often simply referred to as "THE LAND"—as in Exodus 32:13, Deuteronomy 17:14, and Psalm 37:29.

And so it went: The land itself was not called "Israel"; it was—purportedly—GIVEN TO "Israel". It is Israel's land insofar as one believes that it was bequeathed to Abraham and his seed through Isaac, then through Jacob (thus: to the progeny of "Yisra-El"). So to come back to "Israel" is to become JEWISH. To "RETURN" to "Israel" is to revitalize one's commitment to Mosaic Law, and thereby fulfill a covenant with the Abrahamic deity (rather than to physically migrate). It was a spiritual transition, not a geographical one.

Thus we are given “Yisra-El” as the exalted moniker for the Jewish people. In recognizing this nomenclature, we might recall that Jacob seized the mantle of patriarch via trickery. His name is derived from the Semitic term for “uprooting” (to seize / supplant). Thus “Yakub” means “he who supplants” (with the connotation: “he who deceives”). The appellation was based on the fact that this duplicitous son of Isaac (grandson of Abraham) usurped the exalted station from his favored brother, Esau (Genesis, chapt. 27). He hoodwinked his dying father, Isaac, so as to receive the requisite blessing for securing the mantle of patriarch of the lineage. Consequently the legacy of the seed of “Yisra-El” is predicated on this act of deception. (Also bear in mind that, according to Genesis 20:12, Isaac was conceived via incest; as Sarah was Abraham’s half-sister via their shared father.)

Hence the very existence of Beth Israel was based on trickery. Ironically, the exalted bloodline (Jacob’s progeny) could be read as illegitimate according to its own lore. Note that the deception didn’t end there. Leah secretly impersonated her sister, Rachel, Jacob’s preferred bride, to ensure that SHE would bear him the anointed progeny. Splendid.

THE WORDING USED IN SCRIPTURE:

The fact that “Israel” refers to a people, not to a place, is confirmed over and over again throughout the Hebrew Bible. In reference to the Hebrews coming out of Egypt, we are told: “The Lord’s anger burned against Israel, and he made them wander in the wilderness for forty years” (Numbers 32:13). This makes crystal clear that “Israel” did not refer to a particular tract of land; and that the earliest Hebrew community was known as “Israel” even when they were not in the Levant. The Abrahamic deity’s anger was not directed at a place; it was directed at a people. (Recall that until the Exodus, “Israel” was in Egypt.)

First Samuel 13:13 mentions establishing a kingdom [“mamlakah” / “malkut”] OVER Israel; not IN Israel (that is: over a people; not in a specific place). And that is precisely what David—followed by Solomon—did. To suppose that such a historical event—assuming it to be true—somehow warrants the establishment of a “medinat ha-Halakha” (Halakhic regime) TODAY is bonkers. This is especially the case if one claims to be interested in democracy (which is, it should go without saying, mutually exclusive with theocracy). After all, a democratic ethno-state is an oxymoron—irrespective of what the designated ethnicity might be.

So how did Judaic scripture refer to the Levant? As mentioned above, the favored terms were the “land of Canaan” and the “Land of Promise”. Otherwise, it was described in terms of geo-political features (as in Genesis 15:18 and Exodus 23:31)...or in vague terms like “the place where you stand” and “the land that you see” (as in Genesis 13:14).

It would later be referred to as “Jud[a]ea”, the area that corresponded with the southern kingdom [“mamlakah”] of “Judah”. (It is another irony that “Judah” was named after one of Jacob’s sons, and thus one of the brothers who deceived “Yisra-El” by faking Joseph’s death.) The alternate name for Judea is very revealing: “Eretz Yehuda” [Land of the Jews]. In other words, solely JUDEA was seen as a land affiliated with Jewish people; as that is where the Judaic kingdom (Judah) had been located. The northern portion of Canaan (“Shomron”), associated with the pagan KINGDOM OF Israel, was referred to as “Eretz Haggalil”. Thus “land of Yehuda” was held in contradistinction to “land of Haggalil”.

To recapitulate: From the earliest days of Abrahamic theology, “Israel” was a people, not a place. This is further illustrated by the use of the phrase “Beit Yisra-El” [alt. “Beth Israel”] throughout the Hebrew Bible. The moniker simply means HOUSE OF the anointed tribe (the progeny of Isaac’s son, Jacob; also referred to as the “seed” of Jacob). Note, for example, Exodus 34:27—in which the Abrahamic deity makes a covenant with Moses, and thus with “Israel”. Needless to say, Yahweh was not entering into a contractual agreement with a tract of land. The covenant was with a designated group of people...who, at the time, were not even in the Levant. (!) Meanwhile, when people ALREADY WERE in the “Promised Land”, interlocutors are told to “report everything you see HERE. Report it to whom? Well, to the House of Israel” (Ezekiel 40:3-4).

Thus: “Israel” was brought to Egypt by Joseph; “Israel” was IN Egypt until Moses led it out; and “Israel” wandered in the wilderness (i.e. Sinai and Negev deserts) for forty years. Later, much of “Israel” would operate in the Talmudic academies of Mesopotamia, and end up residing BACK IN Egypt (and eventually across the Mediterranean basin) during Late Antiquity.

Is there ANY phraseology that might indicate “Israel” was used in another sense? Indeed, there are some places where we read that something happened “in Israel” (a locution that crops up in various translations). When it comes to this particular phrasing, though, the “in” simply means “amongst” (i.e. in a polis, not in a place). In Leviticus, for example, we hear about the foreigners who live AMONGST Israel...which is sometimes translated as “in Israel”. Thus it could be read “in the House of Israel” (that is to say: within a certain body of people). In the Torah, that locution is used in several places:

- Genesis 34:7
- Deuteronomy 17:4, 22:21, 25:7, and 34:10
- Leviticus 20:2, 22:18, and 23:42
- Numbers 1:3, 3:13, 18:21, 23:21, and 26:2

We know that “amongst the Israelites” is the meaning of this locution because, in most of these situations, the Hebrews are not even in Canaan. (!) In other words: things are occurring in their midst...even as we are told that things are happening to those “in Israel”. Genesis 49:7 illustrates the meaning of the locution most vividly, as it speaks of dividing people IN JACOB (that is: dividing the progeny of Jacob). Psalm 78 explicitly equates “in Israel” with “in Jacob” (verse 5). This locution continued to be used in this manner in Deuterocanonical sources—as in, say, First Maccabees 9:27.

In the rest of the Hebrew Bible, the locution occurs in various places. Here are some of the more notable—many of which are used in situations before the KINGDOM OF “Israel” even existed:

- Joshua 6:25 and 7:15
- Judges 3:1, 5:2-11, 17:6, 18:1/19, 19:1, 20:6/10, and 21:3/25
- First Samuel 3:11, 14:45, 17:25/46, 18:18, and 26:15
- Second Samuel 3:38, 13:12-13, 15:2, 19:22, and 20:19
- First Kings 14:10
- Second Kings 5:8/15 and 6:12
- First Chronicles 12:40 and 16:3
- Second Chronicles 24:16, 34:33, and 35:18/25
- Isaiah 8:18
- Jeremiah 29:23 and 32:20

- Ezekiel 12:23, 14:7, 18:2-3, 33:11, and 36:17
- Ezra 4:3/10 and 8:29

...as well as the opening verse of Psalms 76 and 78. In each case, “in” means “amongst” (that is: within a body of people, not at a place). The fact that every instance of this locution occurs prior to First Kings (thus referring to a time that antedates the establishment of a united kingdom under David that was dubbed “Israel”) attests to the moniker’s original denotation.

Such legerdemain is not uncommon. In fact, disingenuous translators of the New Testament pulled the same stunt in reverse. The original version of Luke 17:21 stated that “The Kingdom of god is within you”, but was rendered “...AMONG you”. (That bit of hermeneutic chicanery hinged on the Greek term, “entos”.)

There are other instances where the “in” is used instead of “for” or “throughout”. In such cases, the translation “in Israel” is misleading, as it insinuates a location rather than a body of people. This happens in Judges 6:4. Note, though, that we are immediately thereafter told that “the rest of Israel was sent back to their own tents” (7:8). Clearly, it is used to refer to a community (that is: to a group of people).

We encounter a similar problem with the locution “all Israel”, which means EVERYONE in Israel (qua group of people), not EVERYWHERE in Israel (qua tract of land). Such phrasing pertains to all denizens of Beth Israel rather than to the entirety of a particular tract of land.

There are some other explanations for the use of the locution, “in Israel”:

- The preposition “in” is used instead of “over”. This happens in Deuteronomy 17:20, First Kings 18:36, and Micah 5:2. Note, though, that “over” is often used where it IS supposed to be—as in, say, Second Samuel 19:22 and Ecclesiastes 1:12. This indicates that “over” may have been transplanted with “in” in certain places by unwitting scribes.
- “Israel” is inserted when a location has already been specified after “in”. This happens in Malachi 2:11, where the location is simply Jerusalem. Hence “Israel” is not used to specify a place.
- Sometimes “Israel” REALLY IS used to refer to a place, but it is referring to the (pagan) KINGDOM OF Israel (as opposed to the Kingdom of Judah). This happens in Deuteronomy 18:6; Numbers 1:45 and 18:14; Judges 19:29 and 20:6; Second Samuel 21:24 and 24:9; First Kings 19:18 and 21:21; Second Kings 1:3-16, throughout chapter 3, and 9:8; Second Chronicles 34:21; and Joshua 11:16-21. Most notable are the passages talking about Elijah, whose escapades occurred in the northern (pagan) kingdom—hence descriptions of him “in Israel”. There, “Israel” is used disparagingly, so is not associated with Judaic heritage.
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And sometimes references are made to the UNIFIED Kingdom of Israel (as it purportedly existed during the reigns of David and Solomon)—as in First Chronicles 21:14, 22:10, and 29:25.

Admittedly, there are a few passages where the use of the locution “in Israel” is somewhat confounding—as in Deuteronomy 17:20 (kingdom in Israel) and 18:6 (dwelling in Israel). Such anachronistic phrasing is peculiar, yet unsurprising considering how late the earliest manuscripts of the Torah occur. Pace the Dead Sea Scrolls, the oldest codex for the Hebrew Bible, from Damascus, dates only back to c. 1000 A.D. (that is: a millennium and a half after the Exilic Period). The Leningrad codex dates from even later. The Masoretic “Aleppo codex” is from the 10th century A.D.; and does not include the Torah. Meanwhile, the Masoretic “Ashkar-Gilson” and London codices from the 8th century A.D. contain only a segment of Exodus. (The language of Mesoretic texts, it should be noted, was primarily ARAMAIC.) Over such a tremendously long period of (often-idiosyncratic) transmission, extensive modification could have occurred. The coming and going of various anachronistic phrasings was inevitable. For example, Deuteronomy 17:20 was most likely “kingdom OF Israel”, while 18:6 was most likely “dwelling AMONGST Israel”.

Additionally, we might note the occurrence of the locution in 39:11, 44:28-29, and 45:8/16 in the Book of Ezekiel, where the wording is somewhat awkward. This is also likely attributable to scribal snafus. For elsewhere in Ezekiel (33:11), we encounter the exhortation: “Turn from your evil ways; for why will you die, house of Israel?” Clearly, Yahweh was not addressing a kingdom—let alone a nation-State—located in the Levant; he was addressing certain people, wherever they happened to reside. A territorial demarcation cannot turn away from evil ways; nor can it die. Ezekiel 20:38 refers to the “land of Israel”; yet 36:17 refers to a time when Beth Israel dwelled in “their own land”...rather than referring to when the Jewish people dwelled “in Israel” (that is: when “Israel dwelled in Israel”, which would not have made sense). The point was that the Abrahamic deity bequeathed a tract of land TO Beth Israel. (Where was that promised land? Canaan.)

It’s also worth considering the Biblical passages that specify the geographical boundaries of the Promised Land. Ezekiel 47:14-21 refers to “the land”, which was to be divided AMONGST Beth Israel. (Ezekiel 39:28 refers to “their own land”.) The opening verses of chapter 34 in Numbers refer to “the land of Canaan”. The opening verses of chapter 15 in the Book of Joshua refer to “the land of Judah”. All these verses deal with the demarcation of a TERRITORY. For whom? For Israel. (The territory ITSELF is not Israel.)

Another point worth noting: Such Biblical claims can no more be used as justification for geo-political agendas TODAY than, say, claims made in the Nibelungenlied and Völsunga saga by Nordic peoples...or the Iliad and Odyssey by Hellenic peoples...or the Khwaday-Namag and Shahnameh by Persians...or in the Mahabharata and Ramayana by Hindus...or in the Kojiki and Nihon-shoki by the Japanese. Using ancient lore to justify present-day territorial claims is not only spurious, it is the height of mendacity.

The supposition that “Israel” was meant to refer to a place is further belied by the Song of Solomon, wherein “Israel” is thought of as a bride, wooed by the Abrahamic deity. The authors clearly did not think of Israel as a nation-State (let alone a one that represented the Jewish people). God was enjoining a religious community, not a theocratic regime. This metaphor was used for the Promised Land as well. In Isaiah 62:4, the land bequeathed to the chosen people is said to be the BETROTHED of the chosen people: “Your land shall be called ‘Beulah’ [betrothed].” Obviously, the land itself was not “Israel”; as the land was BETROTHED TO “Israel”. This usage is corroborated in the third verse of the opening chapter of the Book of Isaiah, Isaiah equates Israel with my people. In fact, the

opening verse of the entire book tells us that “Israel” doesn’t know certain things (that is: things that it SHOULD know). This was an admonishment directed at a people...who, it might be noted, primarily did NOT dwell in the Land of Purple.

Salient passages abound. Also note Isaiah 5:7 (where the House of Israel is equated with the people in the kingdom of Judah) and 9:8/12 (where god’s anger is directed against the followers of Jacob: “Israel”). In 11:12, when declaiming Judaic eschatology, the diaspora is referred to as the “dispersed of [the kingdom of] Judah”, gathered from the four corners of the Earth (when the time would come for the Messiah). In the same passage, these dispersed people are also dubbed the “outcasts of Israel”. (Here, the preposition “of” means “from amongst”.) If “Israel” referred to a territory, it would have instead used the phrasing “exiles from Israel”. (Referring to, say, the “outcasts of Scientology” does not make Scientology a place.) Also in Isaiah, the Abrahamic deity (as the “Redeemer of Israel”) says of his servant’s mission that he shall “raise up the tribes of Jacob and restore the survivors of Israel” so that he might be “a light to the nations” (49:6-7). {12} Needless to say, land cannot be “redeemed” (in the moral sense meant here), nor does land “survive” (in the sense meant here). This is in keeping with the terminology of the Mishnah. In the “Kaddish” prayer, we hear references to “the prayers and supplications of all Yisra-El”, hoping for the salvation “for all Yisra-El”...and “during the lifetimes of all Yisra-El”. That prayer comes from the original Aramaic (which means it uses the idioms of the Mishnaic era).

Another illustration of how the term “Israel” was used in Classical Antiquity is found in the Book of Lamentations, in which the prophet Jeremiah mourns the loss of Jerusalem. Throughout the book, we are told that “Israel” suffered because “Israel” sinned...which is why “Israel” was banished from Canaan. (Places neither sin nor suffer. And it would make no sense to say that “Israel” was banished from “Israel”.) Again, Israel referred to a place, not to a people. {11}

Throughout history, the moniker has pertained to a religious community—wherever it happened to be. Note that the phraseology here involves the simple distinction between:

- “of X”, which is a matter of “belonging to X” (where X is a group) vs.
- “from X”, which is a matter of “hailing from—or being sent out of—X” (where X is a place)

This is why it was not said that “Israel” was going back to “Israel”, as that would not have made any sense. When there IS a land being referred to, it is the referred to in myriad other ways (Canaan, Judea, etc.) The matter at hand was: Where did “Israel” happen to be (and in what spiritual state might it have been)?

Insofar as “Israel” referred to a kingdom, it would have been used in the same sense as “Judah” (as in, say, Jeremiah 30:1-3). However, being as it was pagan, the KINGDOM OF [“mamlakah” / “malku(t)”] “Israel” (i.e. the kingdom in the north, located in Samaria) would not have been the kingdom with which the Hebrews (i.e. the Jewish diaspora) would have identified. NOR would it have been the kingdom with whom they would have been associated by others (at least, not if we are to take Chronicles and the Books of Kings seriously).

Even this northern kingdom—the kingdom of “Israel”—was not always referred to as such, as it was sternly rebuked BY the House of Israel for being pagan. It was, after all, the iniquitous regime against which Amos inveighed. The kingdom to the north was often referred to as “Samaria” (e.g. Hosea 13:16), as that was the name for the part of the region (Canaan) in which it was located. This alternate way of referring the (pagan) kingdom was likely used so as not to cause confusion with the moniker that the Jewish people (the people of Judah) used for themselves: “Israel”.

In sum: The nomenclature here can be rather confusing, as Jacob’s seed (“Yisra-El”) (dwelling primarily on the Judean countryside) did not correspond to what would become the KINGDOM OF [“mamlakah” / “malku(t)”] “Israel” (which was a pagan sovereignty in the land of Samaria).

We might also look to the Biblical prophet, “Hos[h]ea” (not to be confused with the pagan King of Israel by the same name). Hos[h]ea hailed from Galilee, which he would have known as the land of Samaria (and associated with Ephraim). To reiterate: This was the location of the (pagan) Kingdom of Israel.

The nomenclature is complicated for other reasons. The NATION of “Israel” [“ahm Yisrael”] was yet another phrase. It referred to those who worshipped the Abrahamic deity (i.e. the Hebrews) regardless of where they happened to be. Thus “ahm Yisra-El” was synonymous with “Beit Yisra-El” (the House of Israel). The nation IS the house; the house IS the nation; and it exists irrespective of its distribution across the planet. However, EVEN THAT is inconsistent, as the Jewish people are elsewhere described as people hailing from different “nations” (note Acts 2:5 in the New Testament). It makes no sense to say that a nation comes from different nations; so “nation” was used in two difference senses (as a tribe and as a country). It should be noted here that the idiomatic use of the world’s Jewish people as a “nation” (people with a shared provenance) should not be confused with the modern conception of a “nation” (a sovereign State with discrete territory). Thus a “nation” in the former sense may be said to live in several different “nations” in the latter sense. {13}

And so it went that “ahm Yisrael”—as with the more familiar term, “Beth Israel”—simply referred to the world’s Jewish people, who were initially defined as the progeny of Jacob (i.e. all Hebrews)...a label that eventually came to refer to anyone who honored Mosaic law, irrespective of ancestry or location, Throughout the Hebrew Bible, “Israel” is described as a nation AMONG nations...located IN Canaan (alt. Judea). To pretend that this was meant as a prescription for a modern nation-State is nothing short of mendacious. We might note that all the other tribes in Canaan were ALSO nations amidst other nations. It does not follow from that fact that there is now warrant for a political regime based on any one of them.

Tribal distinctions from the Iron Age are as irrelevant to the geo-political prudence as are that era’s various legends. Scriptural justification is an oxymoron: nothing is justified by any given tribe’s sacred texts, as nobody else has any obligation whatsoever to recognize one group’s myths.

So the onomastics here is plain to see. Beth Israel is the diaspora. The diaspora is Beth Israel. Until the advent of Revisionist Zionism, the idea was always that a diaspora was united not physically, but by a shared Faith (that is: devotion to the same god, who was recognized above all other gods) and fealty to a common (Mosaic) law. What they had in common, then, was not necessarily bloodlines or homeland, but worship of the Abrahamic deity (and dedication to a shared creed). After all, the spirit of the Abrahamic deity (“Rua[c]h ha-Kodesh”; “Holy Spirit”) pervades the entire world. {14}

There’s another catch. Not all Israelites turned out to be Jewish (i.e. part of Beth Israel). Of the 12+1 tribes of which the Israelites were originally comprised, only those of Judah and Benjamin—plus the priestly class [kohen-im] from the tribe of Levi (spec. in the tradition of Aaron)—were explicitly Judaic. {5} In a sense, then, it would have been more accurate to refer to those subscribing to Judaic creed as “Judah-ites”, not as “Israel-ites”. {9} For it was the former who were denizens of the kingdom that was intermittently Judaic: that of Judah. {3}

Due to the fact that “Yisra-El” referred to Jacob’s seed (and was also the name of the UNIFIED kingdom under David and Solomon), this taxonomic glitch was un-avoidable.

In Second Isaiah, we can see that the Jewish people fashioned themselves as “a light to all nations” rather than as a literal nation-State located on a specific tract of land. Thus “Beth Israel” was concomitant with a potpourri of nationalities. It was not itself a nationality in the modern sense of the term “nation” (that is: a sovereign State with dominion over a specific territory). The community to which “Israel” referred, then, was defined by a shared Grand Narrative—and most explicitly: a shared fealty to the Abrahamic deity, and commitment to Mosaic law.

Even then, this identity was expressed in a variety of ways—each concomitant with the local culture. This is simply to say that the fealty was shared amongst a melange of ethnicities. Beth Israel was comprised of disparate groups that were scattered across various “homelands”—from Andalusia and the Maghreb to Arabia and Mesopotamia (and even into Persia). In terms of nomenclature, each ethnic group was often known by the land in which it resided; and so took on a distinct identity (replete with its own signature culture—heritage, customs, language, etc.) Hence the “Sephardim” of the Iberian Peninsula and the Maghreb...as opposed to the “Mizra[c]him” of the Levant and Mesopotamia. Later, there would even be the “Ashkenazim” of eastern Europe.

This has ALWAYS been the case. Indeed, the notion of a Jewish “diaspora” goes back to the Iron Age. Hence the proliferation of encomia to the “dispersed of Judah” who constituted “Beth Israel”. Again, we see that Israel was a people, not a place. Consequently, when authors of ancient texts DID want to refer to the region-in-question, they referred to it as “Judea” / “Judah”—as in Jeremiah 9:10-12. According to the Book of Joshua, chief amongst the peoples of the region that the Hebrews were exhorted to exterminate were the Canaanites [“Kena’anim”]. So even as the “promised land” for the Hebrews was Canaan, it may have caused confusion to refer to this land simply as “Canaan” in certain contexts.

In his landmark book, “The Invention of the Jewish People”, Shlomo Sand noted: “[T]he further we move from religious norms and the more we focus our research on diverse daily practices, the more we discover that there never was a secular ethnographic common denominator between the Jewish believers in Asia, Africa, and Europe. World Jewry had always been a major religious culture [as opposed to a distinct racial demarcation]. Though consisting of various elements, it was not a strange, wandering nation.” That is to say: Beth Israel was comprised of a potpourri of ethnicities, existing in different homelands; it was not a monolithic tribe-in-exile.

Sand continues: “The offspring of the Judaizers [promulgators of the Mosaic creed] around the Mediterranean, in Adiabene, before and after the Common Era, the descendants of the Himyar[ite]s, the Berbers, and Khazars, were linked by the Jewish monotheism that bridged the diverse linguistic-cultural groups which arose in far-flung lands, and followed different historical paths.”

The nebulous moniker “Zion” was sometimes considered a place—as in an oblique reference to the city of David; as it seems to have originally referred to a particular hill located in the city. (I explore this nomenclature in a forthcoming essay on the history of Jerusalem.) It is therefore telling that Psalm 14 reads: “O that deliverance FOR Israel [a people] would come FROM Zion [a place].” It adds: When the Abrahamic deity finally restores the fortunes of his people, “Israel” will be glad. Clearly, Israel is not a place. Tracts of land do not harbor sentiments; and places can not hail from places. Meanwhile, Psalm 147 (verse 2) notifies us that god builds up Jerusalem, where he shall gather together the outcasts of “Israel”: a clear reference to the diaspora (that is: to a group of people, hailing from different lands). Those who are outcast are still part of “Israel” ; as they have been cast out FROM JUDEA (a place), not from “Israel” (a global community characterized by fealty to the Abrahamic deity, and a commitment to Mosaic Law).

MORE ON THE ARCHEOLOGICAL RECORD:

To review: “Israel” is the name for a group defined by a shared Faith, not by a shared homeland. In Psalm 147, the diaspora is described as “outcast” (from Judea), but all those who have been dispersed are STILL IDENTIFIED AS “Israel”. Whether or not they should—or might even want to—return to Judea is another matter. It is no secret that one can see “the Promised Land” from, well, anywhere. It refers to a spiritual disposition, not a geographical location.

So why the preponderance of misconceptions? Unscrupulous Zionist historiographers claim that four archeological discoveries use the term “Israel” to refer to a Jewish kingdom in Canaan:

- The Merneptah stele (written in Egyptian hieroglyphs)
- The Tel Dan stele (written in Aramaic using the Phoenician alphabet)
- The Mesha stele (written in a Moabite dialect of Old Canaanite, using the Phoenician alphabet)
- The Kurkh stelae [monoliths] (written in Akkadian cuneiform)

This characterization is fallacious. There was no such reference in any of these places; and such nomenclature was never used. Let’s look at each in turn.

Merneptah's victory stele (c. 1209 or 1208 B.C.) roughly reads: "the foreign people are laid waste, bereft of seed [no longer able to propagate]." This formulaic hieroglyphic phrasing is used to refer to certain residents of Canaan. Interestingly, it does this EVEN AS it describes other defeated people in the same passage according to a PLACE: the coastal city of Ashkelon, Gezer (at the northern edge of the Shefela), and Yenoam (in the far-north of Canaan). Thus the defeated Hebrews were not associated with a specific land; they were referred to simply as a people. This is very telling. (The oft-touted translation of the hieroglyphs for "the foreign people" as "Israel" is fallacious.)

To reiterate: This nomenclature was used even as OTHER defeated peoples were associated with a specific municipality (i.e. a PLACE). And so it went that the Egyptians referred to a "foreign people" when they were boasting that they had conquered the proto-Judaic peoples of Canaan (what we would now refer to as the Amorite forebears of the Hebrews). The Egyptians did this INSTEAD OF referring to a sovereign territory.

So if not the Egyptians, might anyone ELSE have used the term "Israel" in their inscriptions? As it happens: YES. The victory stele found at Tel Dan was written (in Old Aramaic) on behalf of Aramaean king Hazael of Damascus [Aram] c. 841 B.C. It boasts of having killed the "king of Israel". Who was that? It was the ruler of the pagan kingdom in the north (likely J[eh]oram ben Ahaziah ben Ahab ben Omri). The inscription also boasts of having killed a potentate of "byt-dwd", taken to mean the "abode of the beloved" (though it can also be translated as "House of David"), which was likely referring to the king of Judah, Ahaziah ben J[eh]oram (not to be confused with the northern king by the same name). This is very telling, as it does NOT specify a Jewish people. (Nor does it even refer to the relevant city as "Yerushalem".)

The Mesha stele was written on behalf of the king of Moab c. 841 B.C. It cites the "House of Omri" when referring to the northern kingdom (i.e. the pagan Kingdom of Israel, located in Samaria). To reiterate: The Jewish people were AT WAR with this northern kingdom—as is made clear in Second Kings 16:5-6. Put another way: Beth Israel was FIGHTING the Kingdom of Israel. Predictably, such idiosyncratic nomenclature has precipitated much of the confusion surrounding the term, "Israel".

The two stelae from Kurkh (Anatolia) are also from the 9th century B.C. They were written for Assyrian king Ashur-nasir-pal II and his son, Shulmanu-asharedu III. The commemoration of the latter's defeat of "A[c]hab Sir'lit" [alt. "A-ha-ab-bu Sir-ila-a-a"] is likely a reference to King Ahab (again: of the pagan kingdom in the north: the Kingdom of Israel). Interestingly, Ahab's kingdom was assigned the Biblical name "Shomron" ["Samaria"].

Here's the thing to bear in mind: Pace the alternate moniker for the disdained land of "Shomron" (where the pagan Kingdom of Israel was located), it is clear that "Yisra-El" was a term that originally referred to the progeny [alt. seed] of Jacob. The northern kingdom (the Kingdom of Israel) worshipped Baal and Asherah...and was the NEMESIS of the seed of Jacob (Beth Israel). It was the pagans vs. the Abrahamic monotheists. Both were Canaanites; the latter were Hebrews (who dwelled in Judea).

So what about the nomenclature for the relevant geography? During Persian (Achaemenid) rule, the region was typically referenced as “Y-H-D”, an Aramaic moniker (typically rendered “Yehud”). THAT would become the basis for the original label for the Jewish people, “Yehudi[m]” ...rendered “Yehuda” in Classical Hebrew and “Judeans” in English. Thus “Judah” is the name for the Biblical figure and the eponymous southern kingdom (the Judaic kingdom in Judea).

But where might this moniker have ORIGINALLY come from? We can only speculate. One possibility is that the term was derived from the Old Aramaic appellation for the Aramaean city-state of Sam’al located on the northern outskirts of Canaan (at what is now referred to as “Zinjerli”): “Ya’udi”. Lo and behold: “Ya’udi” is found in inscriptions using the Phoenician alphabet, as on the Kilamuwa Stele from the 9th century B.C. (The appellation seems to have been a reference to the patron deity of Sam’al, “Ya’u”.)

This explanation becomes even more plausible once we consider that the “Ahlamu” [Arameans] invariably shared some of their culture with other Canaanites—notably: the Amorite godhead, Hadad. In fact, 65:11 in the Book of Isaiah even concedes that many Hebrews (that is: the Judeans) were known to worship the Aramaean god of fortune, Gad during the Exilic Period. Clearly, there was cross-cultural pollination.

Indeed, such memetic transference was not uncommon in the region. After all, the Judaic godhead, Y-H-W-H was likely adopted from the Shasu...whom the ancient Egyptians associated with “Yah-w”—yet another occurrence of the same morpheme. That the earliest Judaic peoples were influenced by (extant) Babylonian and (antecedent) Amorite lore makes perfect sense, given that their lore was first composed by Babylonian scribes during the Exilic Period. Note that the first four kings of Babylon were Amorite—beginning with Su[mu]-Abu[m] in the 19th century B.C.

How else did the ancients refer to the Land of Purple? There is an inscription on the stele at Memphis on which Ptolemy IV commemorated his victory over the Seleucids at Raphia (near Gaza) c. 217 B.C. That inscription refers to the region as “**Coele-Syria**” [“Greater Syria”] in Greek; and then denotes “the land of the Assyrians and the land of the Phoenicians” in Demotic Egyptian. So far as Levantine lands went, there was nothing referred to as “Israel”.

That just about covers it. The inscriptions enumerated here are an exhaustive account of salient evidence. This is not the result of having cherry-picked only the inscriptions that happen to comport with the present thesis. So far as I’ve been able to find, these inscriptions account for the entirety of what is now available from the archeological record. There is no countervailing evidence of which I am aware.

That takes care of geographical onomastics. Let’s revisit the nomenclature for the people-in-question: “Hebrews” / “Yehudi[m]” (viz. residents of Yehud; alt. “Judeans”). It is telling that the alternate moniker for Hebrews eventually became “Israelites”. That term ALSO refers to a people, irrespective of country affiliation. So what’s the distinction? “Beth Israel”, based as it was on the notion of a HOUSE, intimated a body of people; whereas “Israelites” referred to a kind of people (DENIZENS OF that house). This adjustment in terminology enabled an individual to be designated an “Israelite” (that is: a member of “Israel”). Such nomenclature made sense because the term “Israel” was not tied to any specific place.

But what about the etymology of the moniker, “Israelite”? It is the Anglicized version of the term “Yisraeli”—a label that originally meant that one was a member of “Yisra-El”. Tellingly, that included not

only Jews, but Samaritans as well. {32}

Thus “Israelites” is the equivalent of “B’nei Yisra-El” (the sons / children of Israel)—which is to say: the progeny of Jacob. It is quite telling that even the denizens of the pagan kingdom in the north (who weren’t necessarily Jewish) were ALSO referred to as “Israelites”. (In other words: some “Israelites” were not even part of Beth Israel.) This onomastic parity was illustrated in Exodus 24:9-11, where “elders of Israel” is synonymous with “leaders of the Israelites”. The passage refers to a period when “Israel” was migrating from Egypt, and was located at Sinai; so it clearly had nothing to do with a specific place. One could be an “Israelite” wherever one happened to reside—be it in the Levant or anywhere else. Thus the label “Israelite” said nothing about country of origin. (Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt...so that they could go to “the Promised Land”.)

The bottom line is that NONE of this had anything to do with a particular tract of land.

During the Iron Age and on through Classical Antiquity, residents of the region-in-question (Canaan) who emphasized their Jewish identity would have considered themselves “Judeans” / “Yehudi[m]”. Why? Because the land from which they hailed was called “Judea” / “Yehud” . Yet referring to themselves as “Israelites” would have said nothing about where their country of origin might have been. Hence the term “Israelites” can be rather misleading because it does not refer to people who are from a PLACE; as there was no place known as “Israel” (barring the designation of the pagan kingdom located in Samaria).

To reiterate: “Beth Israel” is the name of a group qua UNITY (a house), whereas “Israelites” refers to a collection of individuals, each of which is an “Israelite” (a member of the tribe known as “Israel”).

Hebrews hailing from the place-in-question were first known as Canaan-ites, as the place’s ORIGINAL name was Canaan. Later, they were simply known as Judeans, as they hailed from Judea, wherein was located the (Judaic) Kingdom of Judah. Later still, they were thought of as Jewish Palestinians, as they were practitioners of Mosaic law who hailed from Palestine. Their ETHNIC designation came to be “Hebrew”. (I discuss this nomenclature in a forthcoming essay.) It might also be noted that alternate labels were used when referring to BELIEVING Hebrews—such as “Nazirite” [one who is consecrated; one who has taken a vow]. That is the descriptor used for Samson in the sixth chapter of Numbers. (Later, “Nazarene” was a synecdoche used for Christians, as their Christ hailed from Nazareth.)

How large was the exiled Jewish community during the Exilic Period? Likely just three to four thousand. Most did not actually end up residing in Babylon proper, but in Nippur, just to the south. The most fabled of the Exilic scribes was Ezra, who would have written in (Babylonian) Aramaic script—as Classical Hebrew script (itself derived from Semitic antecedents, like Samaritan and Old Aramaic) did not yet exist. (It was not until the 1st century A.D. that Judaic scripture was re-written in the familiar block letters of Classical Hebrew...which was derived from the Samaritan variant of Old Aramaic.) Later Babylonian scribes would include Jeremiah and Baruch. Tellingly, in the Book of Baruch, “Israel” speaks in the FIRST PERSON: “Happy are we, O Israel”. In other words: We are “Israel”, regardless of where we happen to be.

It is worth bearing in mind that the Torah and other Deuteronomic texts were composed in Mesopotamia during the Exilic period. The material was first written down by Babylonian scribes in the 6th century B.C.

They were harking back to the halcyon era of the fabled King Josiah of Judah (who’d ruled the southern

kingdom in the 7th century B.C.) so as to retroactively establish an exalted Davidic legacy. The “catch” is that anything prior to Josiah is, in all likelihood, farce–tailored post hoc so as to legitimize Judaic claims centuries after the fact.

So what about AFTER the Exilic Period? The archeological record continues to furnish us with clues. The so-called “Edict of Cyrus” was the reputed means by which the Hebrews were repatriated to Canaan at the conclusion of the exile in Babylon. That this fabled edict designated a putative “Land of Israel” (to which the Hebrews would be repatriated) is an enticing bit of apocrypha. Such phraseology is based on tales of Joshua found in Second Chronicles and the Book of Ezra. There is no archeological evidence that any edict used such wording.

In the 530’s B.C., pursuant to overtaking Babylon, the (Persian) Achaemenids gave the Jewish community freedom of movement throughout the region. This began what would be dubbed the “Second Temple Period” (inaugurated by Ezra) in Judaic lore. It is revealing that at the conclusion of the Exilic Period, in 538, when the Persians invited the Hebrews of Babylon to return to Canaan (spec. “Judea”) if they so wished, the majority of them opted to remain in Babylon. Others opted to settle in Egypt instead (esp. in Elephantine and Alexandria). In other words, they were mostly what we would now consider NON-Zionists. There was obviously no (perceived) pressing need to go back to the tract of land located immediately to the west of the Jordan river. This would make ABSOLUTELY NO SENSE if we were to take Revisionist Zionist historiography seriously.

The Achaemenids retained control over Canaan until it fell to Alexander the Great c. 332 B.C. Shortly thereafter, it fell under Ptolemaic control; during which time much of the Jewish community opted settle in Egypt (primarily in Alexandria), as exemplified by the writer, Yeshua ben Sira[ch] in the 2nd century B.C. And how did “Ben Sira” phrase things? Lo and behold: He equates “in Jacob” with “in Israel” (ref. his “Wisdom” texts; chapt. 24). He was referring to the progeny of a patriarch.

In 200 B.C., the Levant fell to the Seleucids, who maintained control until c. 164 B.C., when the (Maccabean) Hasmoneans took over. There was a century of Hasmonean rule (164 to 63 B.C.), starting with the Maccabean revolution. The Maccabees referred to the land as “Judea” (as referring to it as “Israel” would not have made sense). THEY were Israel, not the territory on which they lived.

When the **Book of Amos** was written, the topic of having been uprooted from a land (and the prospect of returning to it) was broached. This was for the simple reason that the Hasmoneans wanted to legitimize their rule in the Levant. Making use of etiological myth, while invoking Providence, was the obvious way to do this. Even then, it was a PEOPLE who were referred to as “Israel” (9:14-15). This is illustrated by the fact that the Abrahamic deity addresses “Israel” (i.e. the Jewish people, wherever they happen to be)—as in, say, 4:5. Indeed, throughout the Book of Amos, the Abrahamic deity refers to “my People, Israel”. In scolding wayward Hebrews, the Abrahamic deity addressed “Israel” in 4:11-12. We are told that god punished Israel because “you did not return [reaffirm your fealty] to me... Therefore I will do this to you, O Israel. And because I will do this to you, prepare to meet your god, O Israel.” (Hence it was the Abrahamic deity that ensured Babylon would defeat the Hebrews.)

The only OTHER sense in which “Israel” was used was to name the disdained pagan kingdom in the north—against which Amos railed for its socio-economic injustice. (Though he conducted his ministry in the Galilee, the land to the north, the prophet hailed from Judea—wherein was located the Judaic kingdom: “Judah”.) Amos lamented the fact that a corrupt regime (the kingdom of Israel) existed in northern Canaan, and so looked forward to the day that his fellow believers (the progeny of Jacob; i.e. “Yisra-El”) would triumph. Triumph over whom? Over the derided (non-Judaic) Kingdom of Israel. This irony is lost on today’s Revisionist Zionists.

There do occur a few instances where the phrase “land of Israel” occurs (as with, say, First Samuel 13:19); but it is not referring to a sovereign land CALLED “Israel”. Rather, it is referring to the land on which “Israel” (i.e. the Hebrews) happened to reside at the time. It was not until the development of the Mishnah in the late 3rd century A.D. that the neologism “Land of Israel” appeared in the normal discourse using the nomenclature “*eretz X*” (where X was “Israel”), whereby the insinuation was that there was a LAND that might itself be thought of as “Israel” (i.e. the people with whom it was associated). To name a place after the people who live there (and claim the land as their own) is a common phenomenon—from, say, the Barbary Coast to the Swahili Coast.

Even then, this was not necessarily intended as an instantiation of “Israel” as a particular PLACE. Note that X in this nomenclature refers to PEOPLE. This is in keeping with Arabic nomenclature. In the phrasing used by medieval Arabs, the Jews were referred to as “Bani Isra’iil”. “Bani X” indicated a tribe [sons of X], where X was not a place, but a bloodline. Hence the title of the Koran’s 17th Surah.

Other instances of this nomenclature illustrate the point. During the Late Middle Ages, the Rhineland was dubbed “Ashkenaz”; so the Jews who lived there were dubbed “Ashkenazim”. The Iberian Peninsula and North Africa was dubbed “Sepharad”; so the Jews who lived there were dubbed “Sephardim” (ref. the Book of Obadiah 1:20).

Thus there was a recursivity to the naming scheme: “*Eretz Ashkenaz*” for “Germany” (with the connotation: “Land of the Jews from Ashkenaz”; where “Ashkenaz” was ITSELF an appellation for Germany). This nomenclature hardly entailed that Germany was thought of as a Jewish land; it was simply a place (Ashkenaz) wherein were located Germanic Jewish communities (Ashkenazim). Indeed, the Rhineland (and, more broadly, eastern Europe) was but ONE OF the many places where Beth Israel could be found in the world. Alas, such onomastic recursivity convolutes the etymology of “Ashkenaz”, as it served simultaneously as an ethnonym and as a demonym—thereby conflating the two. This is analogous to the conflation of ethnonym and demonym with regard to the term “Israel”. (Dual meaning also exists for the term “Jew[ish]”. It can mean either religious affiliation or ethnicity.)

The ensuing etymological “the chicken or the egg” conundrum is resolved by the morpheme’s ACTUAL etymology. The moniker seems to have been derived from the Assyrian term for people of the Eurasian Steppes: the “Ashguza”. This makes sense, as the Ashkenazim are primarily descendants of the [k]Hazars (see my essay: “The Forgotten Diaspora”). Note that a similar onomastic convention is found with “Sephardi[m]”, which is based on the medieval Judaic moniker for the Iberian peninsula: “Sepharad”.

To recapitulate: When the nomenclature “Eretz X” was originally used to refer to a place, X always referred to a group of people, not to a place (as “eretz” means land). However, in the cases of European Jewry, even as X was the moniker for a people, it was itself derived from the name they coined for the place in which they lived. This is why it made sense that when medieval Jews referred to Germany, they used “Eretz Ashkenaz” (ostensibly: land where the Ashkenazim dwelled); and when they referred to Andalusia, they sometimes used “Eretz Sephard” (ostensibly: land where the Sephardim dwelled). To reiterate: This is redundant, as it is based on onomastic recursivity: “Ashkenaz” and “Sepharad” were originally the names of the places in question.

Rarely was the moniker “Eretz Israel” used; for the Jewish people (qua “Israel”) were located in no one particular place. So using such nomenclature would not have made any sense.

LANGUAGE & DEMOGRAPHICS:

During Classical Antiquity, and through the Mishnaic era, Aramaic was the primary language used even by the Hebrews. (During Late Antiquity, the go-to language was an offshoot of Aramaic: Syriac.) This is demonstrated by the earliest scrolls of Jewish prayer—as with the benediction from Numbers 6:24-26: “May YHWH bless you and keep you. May YHWH make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you. May YHWH lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.” This has come down to us via Aramaic sources, not from Classical Hebrew.

The famed 1st-century Jewish historian, Yosef ben Matityahu of Judea (a.k.a. “Josephus”) composed his works in (Syrio-)Aramaic, not in Classical Hebrew. The 1st-century “Targum Onkelos” was written in Aramaic, not in Classical Hebrew. One might also note the ancient boundary markers for Gezer from Classical Antiquity: written using Aramaic and Greek script, not Classical Hebrew. Even during the Judaic heyday of Palestine, the Hasmonean period, the *lingua franca* of Canaan were Aramaic and Koine Greek. (Hence the need for the Septuagint.) Some prayers, such as the “Kol Nidrei” [“All Vows”], dating from the Middle Ages, are still rendered in Aramaic. Texts through the Masoretic period (that is: the Middle Ages) retain vestiges of their Aramaic origins.

The Jews of Roman Palestine primarily spoke Aramaic (and later, Syriac), as with Jesus of Nazareth. (If anything, the only other predominant Semitic language would have been Samaritan.) So it is likely the terminology used would have been in keeping with the (incumbent) Aramaic branch of the Semitic languages. Tellingly, Masoretic texts are **PRIMARILY** Aramaic—with only hints of Classical Hebrew. This points not only to the origins of the text, but to the fact that the original language of Judaic scripture persisted until the 11th century. Behold the Masoretic “Ashkar-Gilson” and “London” codices from the 8th century A.D. as well as the Masoretic “Aleppo” codex from the 10th century A.D.

Tellingly, the Babylonian scribes of the Exilic Period referred to the liturgical language that they established **NOT** as “Hebrew”, but as “sefat Kena’an”: the language of Canaan. (!) The language used by the great Talmudic scholars was a Babylonian version of what we now call “Middle Aramaic”. The signature block script that came to be associated with Classical Hebrew was known as “Ashuri” (meaning “Assyrian”). (Its contemporary Aramaic offshoots were Mandaic and Syriac.) Predictably, it was the Samaritans (that is: the people who remained in Canaan) who retained the script that was closest to the writing’s Aramaic roots.

Even as the Land of Purple was home to many peoples over the centuries, demographic records reveal much about the region. Hebrew scripture is very telling about who the residents of Canaan were in Classical Antiquity. As we've seen, the Torah refers to Canaan's inhabitants simply as CANAANITES ["Kena'anim"]—as in, say, Exodus 23:23. More specifically, denizens of the land are referred to variously as Amorites, Hittites, Hivites, Perez-ites, and Jebus-ites. {15} Later (e.g. Ezra 9:1), we hear about Moabites and Ammonites as well. In Judges, we hear about the Ephraim-ites (to the north) and the people of Gilead (east of the Jordan river). Throughout the Hebrew Bible, there is no use of the term "Israelites" to refer to the autochthonous residents of Canaan...any more than "Israel" was used to refer to a specific tract of land. Salient terms only refer to a certain people (the Hebrews)...WHEREVER they happened to be. In other words: Beth Israel referred to the post-Exilic diaspora. {7}

Palestinians who emphasized their Jewish identity continued to fashion themselves a "Judeans" . During the uprisings of 66-73 A.D., Jewish rebels—be they Essenes, Sicarii, Sadducees, or Pharisees—designated themselves as such. The same went for the revolt of 132-136 A.D. under Bar Kokhba. Had they succeeded, and won independence, they likely would have dubbed their kingdom "Judah" / "Jud[a]ea" (alt. "Yehud"). Even by the 3rd century, Origen of Alexandria—the most famous Palestinian Christian commentator of the era, was still referring to the Holy Land as "Judea".

Herodotus was not the last to use the term based on the Iron Age moniker, "P-L-S-T". When it came to the Land of Purple, variants of the moniker "Palestine" continued to be used—even by the world's Jews—through Late Antiquity. The moniker (rendered "Philistia" in Hebrew) was even used in Judaic lore—as in Psalm 87:4. In the early 1st century A.D., the Jewish thinker, Philo of Alexandria referred to the land as "Palaestina[e]", and even noted that those of ancient times referred to it as "Canaan" or "Land of the Canaanites". The great (Andalusian) Roman geographer, Pomponius Mela referred to it as "Jud[a]ea". And in the late 1st century, the Jewish historian, Josephus referred to it as "Palaestina[e]" (ref. his "Antiquities of the Jews"). In fact, during Late Antiquity, onomastics for the Levant ended up becoming even more specific—dividing the region into "Palaestina Prima", "Palaestina Secunda", and "Palaestina Salutaris" (the old Idum[a]ea).

THE MIDDLE AGES:

By the time Islam emerged as an Arab power, the majority of the world's Jews were primarily in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Greece. (Barring the Samaritans, the oldest continuous Jewish community in the world, the Romaniotes, trace their origins to Greece, not to the Levant.) Others could be found in Anatolia (esp. in Pamphylia, Cilicia, and Bithynia). During Late Antiquity, practitioners of the Abrahamic Faith from Canaan (Samaritans, Jews, and Christians) were often referred to as "Nazarenes". However that label later came to be associated exclusively with the followers of Jesus of Nazareth (i.e. the early Christians). The fact that LEVANTINE Jews warranted their own moniker indicates that they were considered an atypical subset of Beth Israel. It would have made no sense to refer to them as "Israelites" when designating their homeland, as ANY Jewish community would have been considered such. {17}

From the earliest days of the Arab conquest of the Levant (in the 7th century), the land west of the Jordan River was known as “Jund Filastin”...because, well, that’s what it had been known as since the earliest days of the Roman Republic...and on into the Byzantine era. (As we’ve seen, the Romans adopted the moniker from the earliest Canaanites...and the Egyptians...and the Assyrians.)

Throughout the Middle Ages, “Israel” was considered a general moniker (per things pertaining to the Jewish people), with no affiliation to a specific place. This is illustrated by the fact that Turkic (Oghuz) warlord, Seljuk “Beig” (who—until his conversion to Islam c. 985—was a vassal of the Jewish [k]Hazaras) opted to name his sons Moses, Jonah, Michael, and Arslan Israel [Lion of the Jewish people]. Clearly, when Seljuk used “Israel” as a given name, he did not have a tract of land in the Levant in mind. (As a vassal of the Judaic [k]Hazarain Empire, his scope of concern was limited to the Eurasian Steppes—namely: Khorasan and Transoxiana.) There was nothing odd about this; as the medieval tradition of “Israel” being used as a given name amongst Gentiles is well-attested. (Case in point: the European writer, Israel the Grammarian, who was born in the late 9th century. Needless to say, he was not named after a tract of land in the Middle East. He was named for after the Faith community of which we was a part.)

Following the Second Temple period, the vast majority of “Beth Israel” was not in Canaan. Tellingly, Greek historians do not mention any Jews in connection with Alexander the Great’s conquest of the Levant in the 4th century B.C. We hear only about the governor of Samaria, Sanballat III, who was Samaritan. (His father and grandfather were governors before him; which means that Samaritan rule went back to at least the late 5th century B.C.) {18}

Recall that it was “Babylonia” (Mesopotamia) that was home of the “Reysh Galuta” [alt. “Resh Galvata”]—that is: the Jewish leaders known as the Exilarchs. Later, Babylonia would be home to the “geonim” [Talmudic scribes / scholars] and their academies (most notably, at S[h]ura, Pumbedita, Nehardea, and Pum-Nahara). As mentioned, there was also a Jewish presence in Nippur.

This was the case through Late Antiquity. From the Bar Kokhba Revolt of the 130’s until 1948, none of the centers of Judaic activity were in Canaan. During the Middle Ages, the most important Jewish communities emerged in Andalusia. Moses [ben Jacob] ben Ezra was from Granada. Solomon [ben Judah] ben Gabirol was from Malaga; and studied in Zaragoza. Judah ha-Levi was from Toledo. Moses ben Maimon (a.k.a. “Maimonides”) was from Cordoba. Hasdai ben Abraham Crescas was from Barcelona. Joseph Albo was from Aragon. Comparatively few Jews were Palestinian. {17} {19}

It is somewhat ironic that one of the only places where there were NOT regular pogroms against Jews was in the (Muslim-held) Levant, where there existed a few small Jewish / Samaritan enclaves. It therefore would have made much more sense for Jews to migrate to (Abbasid / Fatimid / Seljuk) Palestine...until, that is, the turbulent epoch of the Crusades. And EVEN THEN, the travelogues left by Benjamin of Tudela (in the 12th century) tell us that the Levant and Mesopotamia were quite hospitable to Jews in Muslim areas. (During the Crusades, it was the Christians who engaged in the majority of anti-Jewish pogroms.) Yet during the Middle Ages, the Jewish diaspora DID NOT engage in any “aliya” [migration] to the Levant; and instead opted for a variety of distant lands—notably Occitania and Andalusia. Why? There is only one explanation: Most of them did not see Palestine as their homeland.

By the Renaissance, many European Jews had disposed of Hebrew surnames in favor of their Greco-Romanized equivalent (as with Kalonymos / Kalonymus)...or Arab, French, Spanish, and Portuguese (for the Sephardim)...or Turkic, German, and Slavic for the Ashkenazim.

And so it went: Over the course of the Middle Ages, the Jewish diaspora scattered farther and wider—westward across the Mediterranean basin and eastward across Mesopotamia. Jews the world over considered wherever they settled a “heimat” (homeland)...be it “Ashkenaz” (eastern Europe) or “Sephard” [the Iberian Peninsula] or, well, anywhere else.

Of all the renown geonim between the Classical Antiquity and the modern age, only TWO operated in Palestine: one in the 8th century (A[c]hai of Shabha) and one in the 10th century (Aaron ben Meir). The rest were in Andalusia, Occitania, the Maghreb, Egypt, and—of course—Mesopotamia (where the major Talmudic academies were located). After the Ashkenazim established themselves as a community in the 11th century, major Jewish figures also started emerging in eastern Europe.

By the time of the Seljuk (then Ottoman) Empire, Palestine had become relatively hospitable to Jews—as attested by the traveler, Benjamin of Tedula in the 12th century. Even so, the prominent Jewish figures who operated in Palestine were few and far between—as with Moses ben Jacob Cordovero and Isaac ben Solomon Luria in the 16th century; then Abraham Amigo in the 17th century. Palestine would only become a point of obsession in the advent of Zionism. That was not until the late 19th century.

In his “Nations and Nationalism”, Eric Hobsbawm note: For the diaspora, at no point did Jewish identity entail “a serious desire for a Jewish political State, let alone a territorial State, until a Jewish nationalism was invented at the very end of the 19th century by analogy with the new-fangled nationalism. It is entirely illegitimate to identify Jewish links with the ancestral land of [Judea], the merit deriving from pilgrimages there, or any hope of return there when the Messiah came...with the desire to gather all Jews into a modern territorial state” (p. 47-48).

Beth Israel, scattered as it was across the Western world, was—to put it mildly—multi-ethnic. More to the point, it was only marginally Semitic. Very few were even acquainted with Classical Hebrew...let alone with Mishnaic Hebrew or Babylonian Aramaic. And virtually everyone considered their homeland to be—well—wherever they happened to be; and spoke the local language (which was deemed THEIR OWN language). “Yehudim” were defined by a dedication to the Halakha (that is: commitment to Mosaic law, and fealty to the Abrahamic deity). In other words: the designation was based on piety, not on ethnicity.

Jewish-ness was NOT based on (perceived) membership in a specific ethnic group; it was based on fidelity to a creed. Indeed, for most of Judaism’s history, a person’s identity as a Jew was Faith-based; and had nothing to do with blood and soil.

Revisionist Zionism would seek to change this. {20}

It is also telling that the Great Sanhedrin—which existed until 425 A.D.—was referred to in all sources—Judaic and Gentile—as the “Patriarchate Palaestina[e]”, rather than as the Patriarchate of, well, anything else. We might also look to the Talmudic record. Lo and behold: In the Mishnah and Gemara, the term “Yisrael” is always used as an ethnonym for the diaspora. That is: the moniker refers to the Jewry of the world—who, it was recognized, consisted of myriad nationalities yet shared the same Abrahamic legacy. It was a commitment to Mosaic law that they shared; and that’s about it. Thus the Tanna-im (of the 1st and 2nd centuries A.D.) and the Amora-im (of the 3rd, 4th, and 5th centuries A.D.) BOTH used this nomenclature.

The point is that there were MYRIAD “lands” of “Israel” (i.e. places where Jewish people resided, and called home); most of which were not in the Levant. Hence the use of “homeland” (a purported “moledet” of ALL the world’s Jewish people) in Revisionist Zionist propaganda is extremely misleading. It used to be that to protect “Israel” was simply to protect the world’s Jewish people...wherever they happened to be. Now it means the endorsement of the political power of a particular nation-State in a particular geographical place—replete with any and all its policies, no matter how opprobrious.

The present essay has shown the claim that “Beth Israel” has a singular “moledet” is historically fallacious. As we’ve seen, not even in Hebrew scripture is “Israel” used in reference to a clearly demarcated territory. Alas, such moledet-fetishism is de rigueur in ANY ethno-nationalism. Hence the obsession with “lebensraum”.

We needn’t use “homeland” in the sense of the German “ur-heimat” [original home]. For when it comes to most ethnicities, the ideation is nonsensical. Why? Because ANY GIVEN ethnic group is derivative of antecedent groups. The taxonomy is invariably arbitrary, as it depends on how far back one wishes to go into the past (that is: which national origin myth one opts to adopt).

When the Mongols decided how far back their Grand Narrative went, they drew the line as the occasion warranted. They did not harken back to their Xiongnu forebears any more than the Hebrews harkened back to the Shasu (who were either Amorites or Edomites). For Tengri-ism had little to do with the heyday of Xian-bei; just as Judaism had little to do with the Amorites. (If we go back far enough, the “ur-heimat” of all mankind is Africa!) So it is an open question where any given group’s designated place of origin might be. It depends on how far back one opts to extend the relevant timeline. Ultimately, we are ALL AFRICANS. And all etiologies are social constructs anyway—reflecting the exigencies of the time and place in which they were constructed. Their starting point is typically placed at an auspicious time—that is: whichever pivotal juncture happens to serve the favored narrative.

The understanding of “Israel” as referring to a certain group of people—wherever they happened to reside—continued on through the Middle Ages with other communities as well. This is attested by the title of the Koran’s 17th Surah: “Bani al-Isra” [The Tribe of Israel]. This moniker is not referring to a place; it is referring to a people—as is made clear in 17:104. Even Christians living in Canaan referred to the land as “Palaestina[e]”—as attested by renown chroniclers like Georgios “synkellos” of Tekoa and Eusebius of Caesarea Palaestina[e]. In fact, “Bani al-Isra” referred ESPECIALLY to the Arabian Jews (e.g. those living in Himyar and Yathrib) as well as those living in Mesopotamia.

AND WHAT ABOUT THE CHRISTIANS?

We've seen the onomastics in JUDAIC lore; but what of the CHRISTIANS? Let's start with Late Antiquity? In the earliest centuries of Christianity, and throughout the Middle Ages, Christians were undertaking pilgrimages to Palestine. How did THEY refer to this particular tract of land? Not as "Israel"; as "Israel" referred to a people, not to a place. As it turns out, it was simply dubbed the "Holy Land" ["Terra Sancta" or "Loca Sancta" in Latin; the equivalent of the Hebrew "Eretz ha-Kodesh"]. How do we know this? The most detailed account available is a travelogue from some point between the late 4th to early 6th century, composed by someone named Egeria [alt. "Aetheria"]. The document is now known as the "Itinerarium Egeriae" [alt. "Peregrinatio Aetheriae"]. THAT is how he referred to the Land of Purple.

Meanwhile, in his "Historia Ecclesiastica" (written in the decades prior to c. 323), Eusebius of Caesarea cited Sextus Julius Africanus (c. 200), who stated that—sure enough—JoN hailed from "villages in Judea" (Book I; chapt. 8). Throughout the Middle Ages, the only other reference to the land was as "Pal[a]estina[e]". Thus, in the early 4th century, the celebrated Church Father, Eusebius of Caesarea, composed his "History of the Martyrs in Palestine".

So what of Christian SCRIPTURE? In the original version of the Gospel (that of "Mark"), Yeshua [Jesus] of Nazareth addressed his (Jewish) followers thus: "Hear, O Israel! God is one god; and you shall love him with all your heart, and all your soul, and all our mind, and all your strength" (12:29). Clearly, he was addressing PEOPLE, not TERRITORY. (Abjuring a tract of land to heed one's call is nonsensical.) Moreover, living as he did in the Roman province of Palestine, this fabled Galilean Jew was not imploring some imagined future nation-state. ("My kingdom is not of this world," he specified.) Indeed, "Israel" referred to his fellow Jews...irrespective of from whence they hailed. ALL of them considered themselves residents of PALESTINE, and thus identified themselves as Palestinians (or alternately as "Yehudim"; "Judeans"). To say that they lived "IN ISRAEL" would not have made any sense. {21}

When we hear that this humble Nazarene carpenter was the King of ISRAEL ["Melech Yisra-El"], it does not refer to the sovereign of some worldly domain. As the Messiah, Yeshua was "Melech Ha-Yehudi[t]" (Hebrew), "Basileus ton Ioudaion" (Greek), and "Rex Iudaeorum" (Latin)—all of which mean "King of the JEWS". This appellation occurs in all four canonical Gospels: Mark (15:26), Matthew (23:38), Luke (27:37), and John (19:20). Recall that "Yehudi[t]" is based on the name of the Jewish kingdom: "Yehudah". This explains why the alternate Greek rendering was "Basileus ton Ioudaioi"—effectively: "King of the Judah-ites". {9}

In "Matthew", Jesus exhorts his disciples to go out and preach not to the Gentiles and Samaritans, but only to the lost sheep of [the House of] "Israel" (10:5-6). He was not instructing them to go to a specific place; he was instructing them to proselytize to certain people (fellow Jews) rather than to other groups of people. (Never mind that such exclusivity contradicts 28:19, where he enjoins his followers to bring all nations into the fold. The transition to inclusivity seems to occur in 12:17-21, as a response to the Pharisees' rebuke.) And in the opening chapter of the original Gospel (Mark), the authors refer to the region west of the Jordan River (a.k.a. "Gilead") as (part of) "the Judean countryside".

Meanwhile, when referring to the PLACE where believers dwelled, the New Testament uses the label, “Jud[a]ea”. Thus in “Mark”, when exhorting the residents of the region to flee, they are referred to as “those who are in Judea” (13:14). This nomenclature is consistent throughout the synoptic Gospels. The land in which Bethlehem is located is referred to alternately as Judea and as the land of “Yehud[ah]”; while the Lord’s people are addressed as “Israel” (as in Matthew 2:5-6). “[Beth] Israel” is synonymous with the House of Jacob—which simply meant the Jewish people, wherever they happen to be.

We might also look to the Pauline letters. Saul of Tarsus clearly thought of “Israel” as a community. In his letter to the Romans (9:6), he noted that not all “Israelites” belong to “Israel” ; which is to say that not all those considered “Israelites” are actually confessors in the proper sense (and so are not religiously Jewish). He goes on to mention that “Israel” failed to obtain what it was seeking. Yet he concludes on a high note: “All of Israel shall be saved!” (11:26). Clearly, he was not prognosticating the preservation of a territory, he is referring to the salvation of a community of believers.

Saul proceeds to refer to the wayward Hebrews as “Israel” throughout chapter 11. He speaks of “Israel” being hardened (of their spirituality being attenuated); of “Israel” being jealous; of “Israel” stumbling (of their trespass / failure). He then speaks of “Israel” being saved—always equating “Israel” with the seed of Jacob. He does so by recalling what had been written in antecedent scripture: “The deliverer will come from Zion; and will turn Jacob [the Jews] away from godlessness.” Here, Zion refers to a place (Jerusalem) and Jacob refers to a people (a.k.a. “Israel”). Meanwhile, when referring to the churches in the region, Saul refers to it as “Judea” —as in his first letter to the Thessalonians (2:14). Mentioning churches “in Israel” would not have made any sense.

In the Book of Acts, god’s message was sent to whom? To “Israel” (10:36). It spread where? Throughout “Judea”, starting in the Galilee (10:37). Hence it was specified WHERE the message spread after we are notified TO WHOM it was spread. In every case, “Israel” did not designate a place; it designated a people.

Such nomenclature is found throughout the New Testament. In the letter to the Hebrews (possibly written by Barnabas), we are reminded that god made a covenant. With whom? With “ [Beth] Israel” (8:10).

ZIONISM:

Everyone loves to form legends about their consecrated “homeland” in an effort to bolster the place’s significance. It’s why Norman Christians connected the Abbey at Glastonbury to Joseph of “Arimath[a]ea” in the tales of King Arthur (thanks in large part to the writings of William of Malmesbury, then Robert de Boron). (Gadzooks! The Holy Grail is in ENGLAND?) Gee-wiz, it must be Providence. It only makes sense that god’s favorite PEOPLE happen to be associated with god’s favorite LAND. It all makes perfect sense...if, that is, one is willing to indulge in ethno-centric musings.

Being as they are hidebound ideologues, hyper-traditionalists are inclined to engage in endless revisionism so as to give their present-day claims a veneer of legitimacy—as with cockamamie assertions of territorial sovereignty (in Canaan) along ethnic lines. (I explore this topic at length in the Postscript; as well as in my essay: “Genesis Of A People”.)

Fast-forward to the late 19th century. The original Zionist enterprise was about the Jewish people finding a sanctuary from persecution. That is to say: It was an eminently laudable cause insofar as there was a need for Jews to escape countries in which they were enduring persecution. Until the post-War era, this was a very serious problem; and thus a perfectly valid concern.

Revisionist Zionism has turned this entirely on its head. The Zionist enterprise is now used as a rationalization for Judeo-supremacists to persecute others—namely: any indigenous peoples who stand in their way. The “Aliyah” [in-gathering] is no longer about getting away from a bad situation (in search of safe harbor); it is about going toward a place, and CREATING a bad situation—for themselves and for everyone else in the region. The thinking seems to go: “Someone did it to us; so now we have the right to do it to someone else.”

The initial (secular) Zionists, who were merely seeking refuge from persecution (which they had been enduring across Europe), never referred to Canaan as “the land of Israel”. They simply called it what it was: Palestine. It was not until Revisionist Zionists made the enterprise about RACE, envisioning an ethnically purified LAND (which had been bequeathed to that race by divine fiat), that right-wing elements started referring to Canaan as “[Eretz] Israel”. The rest was history.

Tellingly, the alternate names proposed for the designated tract of land were:

- “[t]Zabar” [alt. rendered “Sabra”] meaning “[place of] rest”
- “Medinat ha-Halakha” meaning “State of Jewish law”
- “Medinat ha-Yehudim” meaning “State of the Jews” (a rough equivalent of the German “Judenstaat”) {22}

Where was this State to be located? In “Eretz ha-Kodesh” [the Holy Land]. Only later was this moniker changed to “Medinat Yisrael”, which presumably meant the same thing: a “State” for a “People”. Located where? In the Holy Land...which was later refashioned “Land of the Jewish People” (i.e. “Eretz Yisrael”). Yet THAT was then reified to mean a tract of land belonging to a colonial nation-State called “Israel”. An ethnic heritage was thereby invoked to assert geo-political sovereignty.

The indication that Revisionist Zionists are playing games with terminology, then, is their way of referring to the tract of land formerly known as “Palestine”, referred to as “Judea” by their forebears...and ORIGINALLY called “Canaan”: the Land of Purple.

There was just one snafu that needed to be addressed. Since these perfidious interlocutors were re-purposing the term “Israel”, they were forced obfuscate its usage as the name for the northern (pagan) kingdom, “Shomron” [Samaria], when coupling it with the name for the southern (Jewish) kingdom, “Yehud[ah]” [Judea]. Instead of the Kingdom of Israel (for the former) and the Kingdom of Judah (for the latter), they were obliged to refer to both of them in their Romanized forms. Ergo the moniker “Judea and Samaria” is used when referring to the entirety of the coveted territory.

Such nomenclature is downright Kafka-esque, as it effectively renders “Judea and Samaria” (i.e. Canaan) synonymous with “Eretz [y]Israel”. By eliding the name of the northern kingdom (“Israel”), which was pagan, with the name of the land in which it was located (“Samaria”), the buzz-term can then be repurposed as ideologues see fit.

And so it goes: The reification of “Israel” (as the title of a modern nation-state) requires that the northern (non-Jewish) kingdom NOT be remembered as the “Kingdom of Israel”. In arrogating to themselves the license to incorporate all of Canaan into what is now fashioned as “Israel” (qua ethnically-pure nation-State), Revisionist Zionists recognize that the name must be shorn of its pagan connotations. So we do not hear of “Judah and Israel” (the Biblical names of the kingdoms); we only hear of “Judea and Samaria” (the Romanized references to those kingdoms’ respective territories).

Such prestidigitation is only noticed by those familiar with the history of the region and of the onomastics. (Part of obfuscation, after all, is to obfuscate the fact that there has been obfuscation.)

To rationalize this onomastic sleight-of-hand, Revisionist Zionists invoke spurious religious dogmas about divinely-ordained real-estate. This fraudulent narrative was put on full display in 1984 by Joan Peters in her “From Time Immemorial” (a cynical piece of thinly-veiled propaganda about the establishment of the modern nation-State in 1948). Among other things, this farcical account whitewashed the crimes against humanity that occurred (namely, the insidious program of forced evictions—and even massacring—of the indigenous population). The piece de resistance was to coin the perverse adage: “A land without a people for a people without a land” (which was fraudulent on BOTH counts). The point of such casuistry was to obfuscate the ethnic cleansing that occurred in the late 1940’s (and ever since); and thereby romanticize what was really a travesty (known to the native population as the “Nakba”), depicting it as some divinely-ordained crusade.

The ethnic cleansing of a land to make way for the exalted group has been a tragically common occurrence around the world since time immemorial. (Just ask, say, the Kurds, the Bulgars, and the Armenians of Anatolia...or the Tibetans of Bod Chen Po...or the Aborigines of Australia...or the native tribes of the Americas).

For the privileged, the resulting society—which invariably operates according to THEIR terms—seems magnificently democratic. For all that they do is by DIVINE RIGHT. Their odious deeds are legitimized by the invocation of Providence. (Those who are in power invariably tend to say of others’ grievances: “All is as it should be; so what are you complaining about?”) There is, however, another term for “democratic only for certain people”: “undemocratic”. {23}

As children, we learn that “fair for some, not for others” is what UN-fair means. Genuine democracies know no subaltern group. After all, selective justice is the very definition of injustice. Insofar as a society abides an oppressed / marginalized group, it is not democratic. Indeed, ethno-nationalism and civil society are mutually exclusive.

The case could be made that the confabulation of a Semitic (as opposed to Mosaic) identity for European Jews was a racist construct (much of it based on farcical genealogy). That construct is intended to portray them as inherently foreign, and thus not belonging in Europe by dint of ethnicity. {24} The upshot is to shift the focus from creed (Mosaic) to bloodline (fashioned as “Semitic”). After all, the Revisionist Zionist program is called BIRTH-right, not FAITH-right.

This insidious program was called “lebensraum” by the Nazis. The irony is that Revisionist Zionists play the same game—though in the opposite direction. That is: It is used as an excuse for the exaltation of Jews as the in-group rather than for the derogation of Jews as the out-group.
{25}

It is only since “Semitic” has become a term for linguistics (rather than for bloodlines) that people have finally been able to dismantle the scaffolding of racism based on this spurious racialist category—whether in the form of anti-Semitism (on the part of bigoted non-Jews) or anti-goyimism (on the part of bigoted Jews).

According to the Revisionist Zionist narrative popular today, the modern nation-State of “Israel” was founded as a project of “liberation” (for the only group that matters) without any iniquities visited upon the native (Arab) peoples. This is a bewildering assertion that no well-informed, honest person takes seriously. (Such ethno-centric thinking should make any descent human recoil.) Though the claim has no factual basis, it SOUNDS nice, and seems to the untutored to be kinda-sorta plausible; so it is allowed to persist in public discourse. Considering what occurred until 1945, it seems like the least the rest of the world could do.

That said nation-State is an ethnocracy—founded on humanitarian atrocities—is rarely discussed openly in polite circles. We might pose alternate questions to make the present point: In terms of historical sanctification, Celtic peoples had considered “stone henge” to be a sacred site going back many millennia. Does this, then, give Neo-Druids license to forcibly evict everyone else from Wiltshire, England?

Farcical etiologies (which involve false collective memory) undergird many ideologies. As Shlomo Sand put it: “Collective remembering is to some degree a product of cultural engineering, which is almost always contingent on the mood and the needs of the present. I also place spacial emphasis on the fact that just as the past is responsible for creating the present, the national present freely molds its own past, which, we must always remember, contains vast empty space of forgetting.” And those empty spaces are often filled with apocrypha, custom-tailored to serve the desired purpose.

So, prior to the primacy of Revisionist Zionism in the post-War era, how did religious Jews refer to the Levant? To answer this question, he might first bear in mind that the original Zionism was a patently SECULAR movement; and did not in any way seek to displace / oppress anyone. It sought to be afforded cantons in Palestine in the Galilee and along the coast for (socialist) kibbutzim, communal enclaves that would serve as sanctuaries for those who’d been persecuted in Europe.

Even the founder of the original Zionism, Theodor Herzl HIMSELF referred to the land-in-question as “Palestine”. When he met with pope Pius X on January 25, 1904, Herzl stated: “We are not asking for [dominion over] Jerusalem, but merely for [some land in] *Palestine*; for only a secular land.” Where did Herzl say he wanted to be buried? Jerusalem...in “Palestine”. The idea of establishing a theocratic ethno-State in the Levant—whereby the indigenous population would be exiled, viciously oppressed, and/or massacred—would have never crossed his mind.

When, in 1933, Jewish communities in Palestine called for a boycott of products made within the Third Reich, mainstream media reported: “Judea declares war on Germany”. It would have made no sense to say that “Israel” declared war on Germany—as that would have included the Ashkenazim and other (Sephardic) European Jews. Prior to the proposition (in 1947) to give a new nation-State the name “Israel”, the moniker referred to the world’s Jewish People—many of whom were not the source of the boycott. It was the Palestinian Jews (i.e. those in JUDEA) in particular who were undertaking the boycott.

Before 1948, Jewish communities in Palestine were referred to as “Yishuv Ha-Ivrit” [Hebrew Settlements]; and their residents (primarily, secular / socialist kibbutzim) referred to the land alternately as “Judea” or “Palestine”...for the simple reason that THAT was, indeed, what it was called (that is, up until the Nakba). {17} To have said “Israel” would have meant the same as saying “Yehudim” (the world’s Jews).

Until the establishment of the modern nation-State of “Israel”, when they opted to conceive of the land in religious terms, devout Jews and Christians thought of the Land of Purple more generally as the “Holy Land”.

Another point: If Zionists had really wanted to create a Jewish nation as ORIGINALLY conceived, it would have been a matter of resurrecting the (quasi-apocryphal) kingdom of Judah; or the Hasmonean regime in what had traditionally be known as “Judea”, which was Maccabean (meaning theocratic and anti-Hellenistic)...replete with the reinstatement of the Sanhedrin and resumption of regular animal sacrifices (both central to the creed at the time). If they opted to invoke what had been the kingdom of Israel, they would have been invoking a regime defined by paganism, not Judaism. The capital of that kingdom was “Shomron” [the city of Samaria], not Jerusalem. Indeed, the KINGDOM OF Israel was often HOSTILE TOWARD Jerusalem...and toward the Abrahamic peoples of the time. {26}

The transition from the HOUSE OF “Israel” (a group of people scattered throughout the known world) to the LAND OF “Israel” (a specific tract of land equated with Canaan, bequeathed to a specific ethnic group formerly known as “Israel”) is the result of a semiotic swindle. Indeed, the notion of “erezt Isreal” is a political locution that has nothing whatsoever to do with anything in the Hebrew Bible; and certainly has no connection to actual history. The “trick”, though, is to pretend that it has EVERYTHING to do with the Hebrew Bible; and is MANDATED by historical precedent.

Referring to the Land of Purple as the “Land of Israel” is deceptive, as it insinuates that the land is to be exclusively affiliated with a particular ethnic group—a group that accounted for a small segment of the land’s demographic composition at a distant point in history (prior to the modern Zionist movement and subsequent “Aliya”). Such added nomenclature is not uncommon. After all, the moniker “China” is based on the affiliation of an entire country with the Qin Dynasty; the moniker “Russia” is based on the affiliation of an entire country with the “Rus” (“men who row” , referring to the Varangians, who had Nordic origins); and “Portugal” is based on the Roman name for the port of the “Gaels”. All are equally absurd labels to use NOW considering the demographic history of each of those lands (which does not correlate with what is connoted by the onomastics).

The difference is that Portugal is not currently trying to fashion itself as a Celtic ethno-State, in which the polis has pledged its undying fealty to the Gaelic mother-goddess, Cailleach.

And imagine notifying all the people of China that only those whose heritage can be traced back to King Huiwen from the 4th-century B.C. are LEGITIMATELY Chinese.

And imagine telling all Russians that they are now obliged to honor the legacy of the Vikings.

To suggest that the entirety of Canaan is to be identified exclusively with one particular ethnic bloc is racist. It is an especially insane sort of racism, as such a proposal is predicated solely on the sanctified historiography of that ethnic bloc. In other words, it is not just perfidious; it is delusional.

To recapitulate: Prior to Zionism, the Jewish diaspora entailed no one homeland for “Beth Israel” . Going back to the Hebrew patriarch, Joseph, the place of origin for the vast majority of the world’s Jews was NOT the Land of Purple. Indeed, for most of its history (per Judaic lore), when speaking of any given Jews’ “homeland” (“moledet” in Ancient Hebrew), Canaan / Judea / Palestine was NEVER referred to in this manner. For in the Hebrew Bible, “moledet” simply meant a familial country-of-origin (that is: wherever one happened to be born). Hence Beth Israel was affiliated with SEVERAL DIFFERENT “moledet”. Referring to the Land of Purple as THE homeland of the Jewish people is thus both historically and etymologically fallacious.

There is nothing especially unique about a name-change PER SE. It might be noted that transformations in the nomenclature of LAND is quite common. Virtually every region on the planet has undergone an onomastic metamorphosis; and those name-changes have mostly to do with the interests of those doing the naming.

WHERE DOES THIS LEAVE US?

As we’ve seen, since the beginnings of Judaism, devotion to “Beth Israel” was devotion to a PEOPLE. After all, the time-honored locution, “Ahavat Israel” does not convey love for a PLACE; it is an expression of love for one’s fellow Jews. And when observers recite the “Sh’ma Yisra-El” prayer, they are not beseeching a tract of land; they are addressing world Jewry: “Hear, Israel!”

So what of contemporary terminology? There now exists the neologism “Israelis”—referring to a NATIONALITY (in the modern sense), which is predicated on a newfangled obsession with a specific territory. It pretends to be a reification of “Israelites”; but is little other than a bit of propagandistic nomenclature—coined, as it was, by Judeo-supremacists so as to comport with their geo-political ideology.

Today, we hear tropes about the “founding of Israel”, referring to the activities of 1947-48 vis a vis a new nation-State in Palestine. However, if we were to be true to history, the “founding of Israel” (qua group of people) only means the monumental struggle of Jacob with the angel, per the Torah. As THAT is the circumstance under which the moniker, “Yisra-El” was established. When it comes to a Judaic legacy, the fabled (united) kingdom of Israel is the only salient touchstone; yet that regime only endured during the reigns of David and Solomon. None of this is to be conflated with the establishment of a modern nation-State called “Israel”, which was a product of geo-political exigencies in the years following the Second World War.

Until the modern Zionist movement, what any given Jewish community considered its “moledet” (homeland) was rarely a tract of land in the Levant. In any case, the notion of equating “volkheit” with “heimat” is a fundamental category error. The Revisionist Zionist use of the term, “moledet” is roughly equivalent to the Germanic “ur-heimat” [true ethnic home]. (The Norse term “heimat-land” is another analogue.) This rubric has been used by tribes since time immemorial to lay (exclusive) claim to a tract of land—typically along ETHNIC lines. We should be reminded that ethno-centrism coupled with hyper-nationalism is the basis for fascism. Indeed, it is the quintessential form of tribal chauvinism. (I explore this odious notion of “homeland” in a forthcoming essay.)

And so it went that “Israel” qua people was rendered “Israel” qua place. An ethnonym was re-purposed as a demonym; then put in the service of an agenda: “lebensraum” in Palestine. This has entailed an etymological recursivity that has become the source of further confusion: “Israeli” is a person from the modern nation-State of “Israel”, which is now a sovereign LAND which based its name on the term for a PEOPLE...who were also known as “Israelites” in Classical Antiquity. Gadzooks!

The more liberal takes on what “Israel” ultimately means are worth considering. It is a state of mind—as might be said of Judaism itself. It can be thought of as an IDEAL. After all, the term literally means “struggle with god”. In any case, the god of Israel was a god of a PEOPLE, not of a PLACE. A land FOR Israel (that is: the place where Zionists settle) could, in theory, be anywhere—even, as Michael Chabon imagined, in Alaska (as in his novel, “Yiddish Policeman’s Union”). After the Second World War, Zionists were even considering East Africa (on a tract of land where Uganda meets Kenya). (!)

In the loftier sense, “Israel” is an ideal to which we may all aspire. For we are ALL, as fellow humans, looking for a “promised land”. {14} Put another way: It is a principle on which people might take a stand, not a specific ground on which one might literally stand. This conception is not far-fetched. Using “Israel” symbolically goes back to the Hebrew Bible—as when we read that the “chariots of Israel” were coming from heaven in Second Kings 2:12. The vision of a promising future is also represented by “Land of Yehud[ah]”. We find such an idiom in the opening line of Isaiah 26—which refers to a longed-for FUTURE. (The implication THERE is that the Promised Land would ALWAYS be known by that appellation.)

In any case, the land-in-question was BEQUEATHED TO “Israel”; it was not ITSELF “Israel”. Of course, that is only true insofar as one believes Judaic folklore. Obviously, not everyone is obliged to honor one community’s myths. Hence, so far as geo-politics is concerned, the point should be moot. For some people at one point in time, Canaan was the land “promised”...at least, insofar as it held promise for a better life. Even if we are to assume that to be true, it should have no bearing on what makes sense for any given people in the 21st century.

Bottom line: The “Promised Land” was not so much a place (qua tract of land) that was promised—bequeathed from on high to a group of trustees—as it was a place (qua panacea) that HELD PROMISE, wherever that might be. It was in this sense that Martin Luther King Jr. proclaimed that he had “seen the promised land”. In this more profound sense, the “promised land” did not correspond to the (dispersed) Jewish people’s various homeland(s). And it obviously did not refer to any particular place. It was a dream to be fulfilled, not a territory to be seized.

Until it came to be a label for a theocratic ethno-State, “Israel” referred to a special group of people; not to a piece of real estate in the Levant. It didn’t even need to mean JEWISH people; it could mean any group that ascribed its destiny to divine Providence. The idiom persisted into the modern era. Herman Melville once averred that “We Americans [are] the Israel of our time.” He meant this figuratively, of course. (Alas, not everyone recognizes an idiom as idiomatic.)

Considering all of this, it is plain to see that the world’s Jewish people have no more a right to the Land of Purple than anyone else—be it Samaritans, Assyrians, Armenians, Arabs, or any of the other ethnicities that have a long history in the Levant.

For religious Jews, referring to the territory-in-question as “Palestine” is problematic, as it carries negative stigmas. Their aversion to “Palestine” stems from the moniker’s association with an Empire that oppressed their forebears: the Romans. To add insult to injury, the Roman “Palaestina[e]” was derived from the purported nemesis of the Canaanite Hebrews, the Philistines. Meanwhile, “Canaan” is posited as the name of the son of Noah’s vilified son, Hamm. Due to this stigmatization, neither moniker is palatable to those whose worldview is grounded in Biblical tales. Names, it turns out, are often addled with semiotic baggage.

But BOTH of those negative stigmas are based on farce; and so evaporate once ACTUAL history is acknowledged. Today, the Palestinians are a people (specifically: Levantine Arabs), not a sovereign nation. This does not make them inferior; it makes them disenfranchised.

And so it has come to pass that Revisionist Zionists would much rather use the moniker “Israel” (the name of their forebears) as the name for a coveted tract of land; thereby rendering this loaded term the name of a religiously-mandated ethno-State. This is to REJECT the term’s original meaning; engaging in a semantic distortion that is the height of mendacity.

According to a more astute heuristic, those in the Judeo-Christian tradition work toward a metaphorical “kingdom of god”. In this sense, “Israel” is more an ideal to be realized than a regime to be installed. This no more requires ethno-centric hyper-nationalism than being Jewish requires proving oneself to be from the seed of Jacob.

The fact remains that the Jewish people of the world, like any other people, simply want to live in a place—wherever it might be—where they can be safe (and feel at home). Reasonable denizens of Beth Israel want this not because they are Jewish, but because they are HUMAN.

Here’s the catch: In the post-War era, this condition has been met in many places; hence the perceived need for it to happen in a particular place (the Land of Purple) no longer holds credence. {27} Moreover, the suggestion that having a home requires depriving others of having a home is downright venal.

In sum: The notion that THE ONLY people who have a right to ANY tract of land are [insert ethnicity here] is so risible as to make one cringe. One may as well hold that the Normans are indigenous to Sussex; and therefore have legitimate claim to all of Wessex and Mercia. Referring to Canaan as the “Land of Israel” is like referring to England as “Land of the Normans” . Doing EITHER betrays an egregious ignorance of demographics and of history.

One might say that Canaan is inherently Hebrew in the same way that Britannia is inherently Saxon; or that the Americas are inherently European. That is: Not at all. As an apt point of comparison: The Kurdish people—originally a Median offshoot—have more claim to Kurdistan than Jewish people do to Canaan. {28}

The “shema” [daily prayer] states that as long as Israel is faithful to god, they will remain in his good graces. For this to attain, it doesn’t matter whether they are located in Jerusalem or in Omaha, Nebraska.

Alas. For Revisionist Zionists, “Israel” has become a rallying cry for racial purity, and a Judaic version of “lebensraum”...based entirely on (utterly spurious) Judaic dogmas. This leads to calls for a theocratic ethno-State situated on what is purported to be a divinely-ordained tract of land. In this thinking, the Hebrew Bible is seen as a celestial title deed; and the Abrahamic deity is treated as a real-estate agent. {29}

It is demeaning to the world’s Jewish people to suggest that integral to being Jewish is believing such balderdash. Most Jews are level-headed, morally-upright people; and it is calumny to suppose that to be Jewish-ness is to endorse Judeo-fascism. All decent people can agree: being fully human is ultimately all that matters. Ethnicity has nothing to do with it. That goes for Land of Purple as much as anywhere else.

Footnotes

{1 The message pertained to the vassal King Yaw (alternately rendered “Yahu” / “Jehu”) of Samaria, who ruled from 841 to 814 B.C. The House to which he is said to have belonged was named after Omri, the (Amorite) king of Samaria from 884 to 873 B.C. The House of Omri was a successor to the House of Ephraim, to which the kingdom’s founder (Jeroboam, per the Hebrew Bible) belonged. Contending that this somehow entails that Canaan is the “homeland” EXCLUSIVELY of the Hebrews is entirely spurious.}

{2 The Kingdom of Judah was named after a man who demanded that his widowed daughter-in-law (Tamar) be BURNED for becoming pregnant out of wedlock (until, that is, he discovered the father was himself). Also note that the Abrahamic deity killed Judah’s son, Onan for—no kidding—pulling out (when having sex with Tamar). It was standard Iron Age family drama.}

{3 But then again, even the southern kingdom (Judah) was ITSELF usually not Judaic. (!) More often than not, it was ruled by a pagan king—as with, say, Ahaz, who gladly allied himself with the Assyrian Empire (which, at the time, was under Sargon II: successor to Tiglath-Pileser III and predecessor to Sennacherib). It was Ahaz’s son, Hezekiah, who would temporarily bring Judah back into alignment with Abrahamic monotheism.}

{4 As early as the middle of the 2nd century B.C., the Jewish author of the third book of the “Oracula Sibyllina” addressed the Hebrew diaspora: “Every land is full of thee and every sea.” This means that even before the (Maccabean) Hasmoneans came to power in the Land of Purple (that is to say: by the time of the Maccabean Revolt against the Seleucids), there was a vast dispersal of Jewish people across the globe. While the Jewish diaspora originally hailed from the Land of Purple (prior to the Exilic Period), the CURRENT diaspora is primarily from Andalusia and the Maghreb (as the Sephardim) and from eastern Europe (as the Ashkenazim). The latter were descendants of a people who were predominantly [k]Hazar (Turkic peoples from central Asia), and thus not even Semitic (a point I address in a forthcoming essay). It is a perverse irony that the only diaspora to undertake a successful ingathering (the “Aliyah”) is the one that managed to establish an ethno-nationalist regime pursuant to having carried out ITS OWN program of ethnic cleansing. The theocratic ethno-State that is now “Israel” has been engaging in a campaign of lebensraum since 1947. The project is based on claims of blood and soil—an opprobrious enterprise regardless of who is doing it. Alas, it is an enterprise with which mankind has become all too familiar.}

{5 Note that the well-known trope, the “twelve tribes of Israel” is based on a discrepant taxonomy. The various lineages were all descendants of Jacob ben Isaac ben Abraham—which is simply to say that “Yisra-El” was the father of the 12+1 tribes-in-question. But how did THAT come to pass? Well, King David sired Solomon who sired Rehoboam: the King who presided over the dissolution of the united “Kingdom of Israel”...and the subsequent division of the Hebrews into THIRTEEN tribes. Those were the progeny of Judah, Reuben, Gad, Asher, Naphtali, Simeon, Levi, [y]Issakhar, Zebulun, Benjamin, Dan, and Joseph’s sons: Manasseh and Ephraim. 13 doesn’t fit well into 144,000 (the declared number of “chosen”). TWELVE tribes makes the arithmetic much easier when calculating the number of saved souls; especially when they must be from certain bloodlines in order to gain entry into heaven. The 13 tribes are resolved into 12 in three different ways. ONE: by omitting Dan (as does the New Testament, which—following Numbers 1:32-33—simply counts Ephraim as “Joseph”). TWO: by omitting Levi (as does First Kings); since the Levites were seen more a cast of priests (Kohen) than as a full-fledged tribe. THREE: by subsuming Manasseh and Ephraim under singular mantle of their father, Joseph ben Jacob.}

{6 One of the lessons here is that one should never impugn “Israel” for anything. Consequently, it is important that criticisms of the Israeli government are directed toward the GOVERNMENT—thereby making clear that the criticism is leveled at a particular set of policies / actions rather than at an entire people. Indeed, the mistake Revisionists Zionists make in their vilification of the Palestinians is holding an entire population culpable for the crimes of a fanatical subset (which is effectively collective punishment). It is crucial that advocates for Palestinian rights do not make the same mistake as those they impugn. In order for the Land of Purple to be genuinely democratic, it must be a land for ALL people (no ethno-centricity); with an unequivocal separation of church and State (no theocracy). As things now stand, Canaan is far from democratic. For more on this topic, see Shlomo Sand’s “The Invention of the Land of Israel” (esp. Chapter 2, “Mytherritory”) and Ilan Pappé’s “The Idea of Israel”.)}

{7 During the Roman Empire, isolated Jewish communities coalesced in various locations—notably: Chalcis (Euboea), Cappadocia (Anatolia), Abilene / Adiabene (Syria), Iturea (the northern edge of Canaan), Alexandria and Elephantine (Egypt), as well as Mahuza and Babylon (Mesopotamia). Communities could also be found amongst the Andalusian “Sephardim” (on the Iberian peninsula), the Yemenites (spec. Himyarites) of southern Arabia, parts of Armenia, and [k]Hazararia in central Asia (primarily due to Turkic peoples converting to the Faith). (See footnote 8 below.) So it makes perfect sense that, in the 2nd century B.C., when it addressed “Beth Israel”, the third book of the “Oracula Sibyllina” stated: “Every land is full of thee and every sea.” At the time, the only Judaic kingdom had been that of Judah (i.e. NOT “Israel”). It is unsurprising, then, that when Isaiah referred to the diaspora, he referred to them as the “dispersed of Judah” (11:12).}

{8 The majority of those who came to be called the “Ashkenazim” were not predominantly Semitic; they were descendants of the [k]Hazars: a Turkic people who had migrated to northeastern Europe from the Eurasian Steppes...ending up in a region that spanned from Lithuania down to Volhynia. (Genetically, Ashkenazim are roughly 10-20% Semitic.) Samaritans, Nazarenes, Mandaeanes, Assyrians, and what are now dubbed “Mizra[c]him” (Arab Jews) are more Semitic than most of the modern world’s Jewish people. Those who descended from the [k]Hazars (i.e. the Ashkenazim) are a mixture of Germanic, Slavic, and Turkic. For more on this, see my essay on the history of Ashkenazim: “The Forgotten Diaspora”.}

{9 The label “Jud[a]ea” would later be equated with the Koine Greek term for “Judean”: “Ioudaios” ...which could be interpreted as “Judah-ite”. Meanwhile, Judah-ism is the Anglicized version of “Ioudaismos”, which essentially means “Judah-hood”. Hence the English term for the FAITH OF said people: “Judaism”.}

{10 It was eventually TAKEN to mean “[one who] struggles with god” in Judaic lore; hence the apocryphal tale of Jacob wrestling the god’s angel on the banks of the river Jabbok (at a place dubbed “Pen-i-El”), per Genesis 32:28. Thus the Abrahamic deity anointed Jacob as “Yisra-El” (also ref. Genesis 35:10). Be that as it may, it is important to note the moniker’s ACTUAL etymological origins. “Yisra-” derives from the verb “[y]s[ra]h”, which ORIGINALLY meant “to prevail / rule over”. (This was easily adapted to the Judaic semiotic; as “Yisra-El” can be translated in an alternate way if one takes god [“El”] to be the subject rather than the object. Hence the workability of the alternate connotation: “God contends / perseveres”...and ultimately prevails / rules.) “El” / “[il]ah” (Ugaritic / Amorite / Eblaite) was the original name for the Canaanite godhead. This Semitic deity was often conceptualized as a sky-god who dwelled on a distant mountain; and was purported to be the father of mankind. Later, the Hebrews modified the moniker in various ways: “El Shaddai”, “El O-lam”, “El Bet-El”, “El Ro-i”, “El El-yon”, etc. (whilst adopting the appellation, Y-H-W-H, from the Shasu). It should come as no surprise, then, that the portrayal of Yahweh in the earliest Judaic texts is sometimes that of a storm-god, in keeping with the Canaanite god, Baal (e.g. Exodus 15, Psalm 29, Psalm 68, Psalm 74, etc.) This makes perfect sense given the genealogy of the theology-in-question. So “[y]s[h]ra-il” effectively meant “ruling god” / “god rules” in antecedent Semitic vernaculars. Considering all this, it makes sense that “[y]sra-il” was an attested theophoric GIVEN NAME in Canaanite cultures of the 2nd millennium B.C. (spec. in Ugarit and Ebla). Also note the distinction between the notion of a struggle WITH god and the notion of “jihad”: a struggle FOR god.}

{11 In the ancient world, a Jew responding to the question, “Where are you going?” with “I’m going to Israel” would not have made any sense. It would be like a Muslim saying, “I’m going to the Ummah.” Beth Israel no more has a specific homeland than does Dar al-Islam. What “Israel” DOES have, according to their own lore, is a promised land. But nobody else on the planet earth is required to honor that lore...let alone what it implies. The Mormons claim a part of Missouri as THEIR promised land. The rest of the world is no more obliged to allocate territorial sovereignty in Palestine according to Judaic lore than the United States is obliged to cede control of Jackson County to the Church of Latter-Day Saints according to Mormon lore.}

{12 The “light to nations” idiom was also used by the Roman Catholic Church to describe its own votaries (as People of God): “Lumen Gentium”. Happily, Judaic lore is no more predicated on a designated piece of real estate than is Vatican lore. Even as it was understood as a domain, Christendom was never conceived as the name of an eternally-demarcated territory. Even the Holy Roman Empire was not a specific tract of land; it was an orbit of political influence that encompassed various kingdoms in various locations at various times.}

{13 As if to make things even more confusing, the writers of Deuteronomy state that the Abrahamic deity apportioned “nations” (32:8). (See footnote 7 above.) We are told that when he divided mankind, he “fixed the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of Israelites.” (?!) In another translation, this reads “...according to the number of gods.” (?!) Neither translation makes much sense. Either way, the terminology is less straight-forward than we might think.}

{14 “Rua[c]h ha-Kodesh” might be taken as analogous to the body of Christ, in which all Christians partake. It is comparable with a community being infused with the holy spirit, which was likewise conceptualized as the breath of god. When it comes to the notion of “kingdom” , the catch is that it can mean either a worldly kingdom (as with the “mamlakah” / “malku(t)” referenced in the Hebrew Bible) or it can mean a METAPHORICAL kingdom (as with the use of the Koine Greek term, “baseileia” in the New Testament). The latter is an abstraction—an ideal to which supplicants aspire (variously described as the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of Heaven, or Kingdom Come). I explore this dualistic conceptualization in a forthcoming essay on Jerusalem. The notion of a Jewish STATE (i.e. “medinat ha-Yehudim”; conceived as a theocratic “medinat ha-halakha”) is a uniquely modern one. The ideation is misleading, as it conflates “Ahm Yisrael” (nation of Israel, qua tribe) with the institution of a theocratic / ethno-centric nation-State—per the dictates of Revisionist Zionism. (See footnote 22 below.) Of course, a political regime is not required for living by “Rua[c]h ha-Kodesh”. That is to say: Living in the spirit of the Abrahamic deity does not entail establishing a specific nation-State.}

{15 The Jebusites were likely the original residents of what came to be the City of David (a.k.a. “Jerusalem”)—a topic I explore at in a forthcoming essay on Jerusalem. Along with the Shasu, the Jebusites may well have been the progenitors of the earliest form of Judaism; as—like the first “Yehudim”—they espoused a heno-theistic theology (that is: putting one god above all the others). This proto-Judaic monolatry posited Y-H-W-H as the godhead (a re-instantiation of the Canaanite godhead, “El” / “Baal”, who’s consort was Asherah / As[h]tarte). Sure enough, in the earliest Semitic records, Yahweh was sometimes referenced in conjunction with Asherah. This is made apparent in Hosea 2:16, when the Abrahamic deity says to the mother of “Israel”: “You shall henceforth refer to me as ‘my husband’ and no longer as ‘my Baal’.” It was most likely around THEN that a novel identity was asserted for this particular tribe of people; and the “Hebrews” were thus established as a distinct ethnic group. That would have been at some point in the early first millennium B.C.; and it would have been done in order to distinguish themselves from other Amorites (who would have espoused a more traditional Canaanite theology). Note that an alternate name for “Baal” was the Old Semitic, “Adon”. Lo and behold: Another name for the Abrahamic deity in Judaic lore ended up being “Adonai”. (!) It was not until later that this new-fangled group formulated their own “Hebrew” language from the antecedent Old Aramaic...via Samaritan (which was itself based on Phoenician). And it was not until even later (during the Exilic Period, when Judaic lore was first codified by the Babylonian scribes) that said henotheism (i.e. monolatry) was translated into explicit monotheism. See footnote 16 below.}

{16 The earliest form of monotheism was likely the cult of Aten (in Egypt) in the 14th century B.C. Prior to the emergence of Judaism, Zoroastrianism (Mazda-ism in Median Persia) posited Ahura Mazda as the sole godhead. Judaic monotheism emerged during the Axial Age, around the same time as Buddhism (which was quasi-monotheistic). By that time, Zoroastrianism was already established as the official religion of Persia (under the Achaemenids). When it came to monotheism, Judaism was an also-ran.}

{17 Until c. 1800, the vast majority of Jews in Palestine were (Arab) Misra[c]him...in conjunction with a smattering of (Andalusian and Maghrebi) Sephardim who’d immigrated from the Mediterranean basin. The former spoke Levantine Arabic; the latter primarily spoke Ladino. It was only starting in the 18th century that the Ashkenazim began migrating to Palestine from Eastern Europe (mostly from the Pale of Settlement). They primarily spoke Yiddish (along with German, Polish, and Russian). Modern Hebrew was a more recent innovation—a way to assert a new-fangled (nationalist) identity.}

{18 In the Book of Daniel, there is an anecdote of Alexander encountering a Jewish priest. It is almost certainly apocryphal.}

{19 It is dismaying how many of the world's Jewish people are still under the impression that most of their creed was formulated in Jerusalem; or that the forebears of those who now consider themselves Jewish hailed from Canaan. During the relevant epoch (the Exilic Period), virtually all of the most important activity occurred in Babylonia. Then, starting in 200 A.D., there emerged the Amora-im, the Savora-im, and the Geon-im (the Talmudic sages who were primarily NOT in Palestine). In addition to Mesopotamia, notable communities eventually emerged in Greece, Anatolia, and Egypt. Later, the most notable intellectual activity occurred in ANDALUSIA (as with Maimonides and Judah ha-Levi). In terms of "nationality" (as we understand the term today), from Late Antiquity and throughout the Middle Ages, none of the prominent expositors thought of the Land of Purple as their homeland. Jewish identity was about commitment to a specific LAW, not to a specific LAND. Pursuant to the Second Temple Period, virtually nothing crucial to the Judaic creed came out of Jerusalem. Indeed, since the composition of the Hebrew Bible by the Babylonian scribes, Jerusalem has never been the center of Jewish thought. The Talmudic academies were in Mesopotamia.}

{20 In addition to the concoction of the chimerical legacy of an "eretz Israel", modern-day Zionists established a modern language "Hebrew", which only obliquely resembles its ancient counterpart (which itself did not exist until the 7th century B.C.) The precursors to Classical Hebrew were Samaritan and Old Aramaic—both of which were based on Phoenician. For Zionists of the late 19th century, the idea was that language would be yet another overt tribal signifier; and so would serve as an additional buttress to their new-fangled nationalism. So they concocted modern Hebrew as their national language.}

{21 In his "Book of Revelation", John of Patmos referred to the Jews alternately as "the tribe of Judah" and "the seed of David" (ref. chapter 5).}

{22 Such loaded monikers should give us pause. The notion of a State for a certain group of people is inimical to liberal democracy. It is odious whether the State is ethnically-defined or religiously-defined. ("Jewish" can mean either.) An ethno-State would be rightly condemned by ANY civil-minded person, regardless of the designated ethnic group. (Imagine the response to the establishment of a self-proclaimed Aryan State.) A State devoted to people of a certain religion is—by definition—theocratic; just as a State devoted to people of a certain racial profile is—by definition—racist. Either is antithetical to fundamental democratic principles. The closest we get to the ideation of a "Jewish State" in the ancient world was the moniker used by the Persians to label the "State for the Jews": "Yehud Medinata". This pertained to the Persian Empire's designated municipality for Jews in the satrap of "Abar-Nahara" [Akkadian: "Ebir-Nari"; Syriac: "Aber-Nahra"; Hebrew: "Ever-Hanahar"]—a name that simply meant "land beyond the river". It was located in southern Canaan (in the Judean countryside). Clearly, the Land of Purple was not known as "Israel"; as naming a tract of land "Israel" would have made no sense. (Yehud Medinata was where a segment of Beth Israel dwelled for the 206 years between the Declaration of Cyrus the Great and the conquest of Alexander the Great.) In sum: Living in a Jewish State is no more required to be Jewish than living in a Salafi theocracy is required to be Muslim. One can honor Mosaic law—however one sees fit—in California just as well as in Galilee.}

{23 Says the favored group, "Things seem perfectly splendid for US; so what's the problem?" We should be reminded that "justice for THESE, but not for THOSE" is the very definition of "injustice". It is also the hallmark of Exceptionalism (esp. as it pertains to ethno-nationalism).}

{24 It is not for nothing that, in its earliest years, some ultra-religious Zionists and Nazis found an alignment on this matter—as demonstrated by the Heskem Haavara [Transfer Agreement] of 1933. At the time, the pact was a perfectly rational measure undertaken to seek a safe haven for Jews who found themselves in a very hostile environment. Of course, support for the pact was not unanimous on EITHER side. Indeed, the founder of Revisionist Zionism, Vladimir Yevgenyevich “Ze’ev” Jabotinsky expressed disapproval. But it was no secret that ideologues on both sides found common cause on this singular point. NEITHER wanted miscegenation; and NEITHER saw Jews belonging in Europe. See footnote 25 below.}

{25 Throughout the 1920’s and 30’s, Adolph Hitler enthusiastically endorsed the idea of establishing a reservation for the Jewish people in the Levant. The initial idea was to expunge them from the dominion of the Third Reich (see footnote 24 above).}

{26 This would be analogous to, say, the Chinese re-instituting the “feng-jian” system of feudalism in the name of resurrecting the Zhou Kingdom...or Indians re-instituting the “varna” system of feudalism in the name of resurrecting the Gandhara Kingdom. Shall Armenians start enforcing polytheism in the name of re-establishing the Kingdom of Urartu? Such zany visions are not unique to Revisionist Zionism. The present dictator of Turkey, Recep Erdogan (who is not only a Turkish Supremacist, he is a Salafi theocrat as well) longs to resurrect the Ottoman glory-days. This deranged fever-dream involves re-establishing a (Turkish) Caliphate and laying claim to vast swaths of land that were once under Ottoman dominion—an enterprise that would entail (FURTHER) ethnic cleansing of the Kurds (see footnote 28 below). We find this same mentality undergirding Donald Trump’s “Make America Great Again”, whereby the United States is fashioned as a quintessentially WASP nation. For virtually any fascistic regime touting X-Exceptionalism, there emerges some variation of the mantra: “Make X Great Again”. After all, Reactionary thinking is about bringing back the (imagined) glory days of some exalted past.}

{27 Given the state of the developed “Western world” today, the requirement that a singular (self-segregated) sanctuary be established at a particular location for a designated ethnic group no longer attains, as such a sanctuary is not needed anymore. That is: The project of relocating the world’s Jews to a specified safe haven may have once been warranted, but such a drastic measure is no longer warranted. For while sporadic bigotry still persists in isolated pockets in the Occident, it does not exist nearly to the degree that it did prior to the conclusion of the second World War. Ironically, the vast majority of anti-Semitic sentiment that exists (outside of white nationalism) can be explained by resentments stemming from right-wing (Revisionist) Zionist policies in the Land of Purple.}

{28 The “Land of Karda” is mentioned in Sumerian records from the 3rd millennium B.C. This was also referred to as “Hanigalbat” in Assyrian; and was called “Mitanni” in Hittite (the lingua franca of the Hurrians and Hittites). The Kurds have continually occupied this area since the Parthian Empire; and have maintained a continuous identity ever since (pace their adoption of Islam). But beware: Making this point to Turks is like notifying the Chinese that the Tibetans have more claim to Tibet than do the Han Chinese. As for a particular land being affiliated with a particular religion, we can draw another analogy. Prior to the Muslim conquest of 651 A.D., Persia had been OFFICIALLY Zoroastrian for over thirteen centuries: starting c. 700 B.C. (during the Median Empire), through the Achaemenid, Parthian, and Sassanian Empires, up to 651 A.D. The oldest Avestan text dates back even further (to the 14th century B.C.) Are we to suppose, then, that modern-day Iran is really supposed to be Zoroastrian? Shall we proclaim that, between the Zagros Mountains and Bactria, Zoroastrians should be able to lord it over everyone else? (Sunni and Yazidi) Kurds, (Shiite) Persians, (Yarsani) Lurs, Mandaeans, and Baha’i would rightfully take exception to such an ornery proclamation. Others who make analogous claims are guilty of mendacity; and for the same reasons.}

{29 Those who doubt whether Revisionist Zionism is predicated on a fundamentalist version of Judaism might consider the names of its flagship organizations. The jurisprudential arm of the ideology is “Shurat Ha-Din” (Strict Judgement). Other organizations include “Gush Emunim” (Bloc of the Faithful), “B’rith Ha-Birionim” (Thugs of the Covenant), “B’nai B’rith” (Sons of the Covenant), and “Otzma Yehudi[t]” (Jewish Power). To see why that last name might be problematic, one need only replace “Jewish” with “White” or any other ethnic group (viz. engaged in self-exaltation). To corroborate the nature of this nomenclature, we might note Otzma Yehudit’s website: “Ha-Kol ha-Yehudi” [The Jewish Voice]...which leaves no doubt what the ideology is based upon. The Revisionist Zionist conception of “Israel” is explicitly grounded in a delusive Biblical worldview—as attested by “Ha-Beit Ha-Yehudi[t]” (House of the Jewish People)—a name that is usually interpreted as “Jewish Home”, in contradistinction to “Beit Yisra-El” (which would betray the origins of the onomastics: House of the Jewish people). Tellingly, THAT organization was formerly called the “National Religious Front”. (It has recently spawned yet another Judeo-fascist off-shoot: “Ha-Yamin He-Hadash”.) Meanwhile, the right-wing political party currently in power, “Ha-Likud”, means “The In-gathering”—a name with overtly religious connotations. To illustrate that “Israel” STILL means a people more than a place, we might look to the right-wing Zionist organization, “Shavei Israel”, which means “Returners OF Israel”, not “Returners TO Israel”.)}

{30 This moniker is alternately interpreted as “land of palms”. It might be noted that that was not the only land in the region named for a color. The southern part of the Levant was originally known as “Udumu” / “Udumi” by the Assyrians...which was rendered “Edom” in Old Semitic (later rendered “Idumaea” by the Greco-Romans). That meant “crimson”. During Late Antiquity, the Land of Crimson was inhabited by the Nabataeans.}

{31 The same confusion arises in Korean etiology; which was based on tales composed in the 12th century A.D. (ref. the “Samguk Sagi”). The scripture tells of events going back to 2333 B.C. Are we to adduce from such dating that the lore-in-question was ITSELF from the 24th century B.C.? There is a fundamental distinction to be made between the timing of events in a story and when the story itself was composed. (Knowing about the history of the story and the story of a history are two different things.) The national origin myth of “Go-Guryeo” is about monarchs who’d been anointed by the gods...a bit of delectable dogma that enjoins Koreans to trace a hallowed lineage (the “Go-Joseon”) back to the legendary “Dangun Wang-geom”...as well as to a line of fabled kings such as “Zhuan-xu” (a.k.a. “Gao Yang”) and Dong-myeong (a.k.a. “Seong-wang”; “Chumo-wang”; “Jumong Hae”). Those beguiled by this myth treat it as actual history—a flight of fancy that prompts the claim that Korea (and the designated tribe) is well over four millennia old. Sound familiar?}

{32 How is the term “Israeli” used in modern parlance? That’s a different story. The label now pertains to a citizen of the modern nation-State: “Israel” (currently, a theocratic ethno-State). The appellation uses the same nomenclature as, say, “Azerbaijani” (a citizen of the modern nation-State of “Azerbaijan”) or “Afghani” (a citizen of the modern nation-State of “Afghani-stan”) or “Pakistani” (a citizen of the modern nation-State of “Paki-stan”). Each of those nations encompasses a panoply of ethnicities: Azeri, Talysh, Pashtun, Sindhi, Balochi, Punjabi, etc. (By contrast, the nationality, “Bangladeshi” indicates a polity that is almost entirely ethnic Bengali.) So there is a fundamental distinction to be made. The distinction here is a specification of citizenship (as opposed to being a member of an ethnic group; a.k.a. a tribe). Yet even “nationality” here can be misleading. Being a member of “Ahm Yisrael” [“nation of Israel”] is an ethnic demarcation, not a designation of citizenship; whereas “Israeli” is a designation of citizenship, not an ethnic demarcation. And “Beth Israel” is a RELIGIOUS demarcation, irrespective of race or nationality. In sum: “Israelis” are a potpourri of ethnicities: Sephardi, Mizra[c]hi, Ashkenazi, Armenian, Samaritan, Muslim Arab, Christian Arab, etc. }

Postscript

When it comes to bringing to light the origins of sanctified dogmas, it is no secret why hidebound ideologues are not receptive to inconvenient truths. But the question remains: Why is there so much push-back from those who purport to be intellectually honest? After all, one would think that most level-headed people would be willing to assess the available evidence; and—in due course—draw sound conclusions: letting the chips fall where they may.

Is it really so difficult to be forthcoming about following the evidence, wherever it might happen to lead?

Alas, things are not so straight-forward when facts jeopardize someone’s vested interests. Even when it comes to well-adjusted people (who, in any other context, have common sense), there ends up being a myriad of pitfalls. It turns out that one’s political, religious, and/or racial identity (replete with tribal commitments and institutional fealties) is a predictor of one’s reticence to accept unwelcome insights on a “charged” issue. This aversion is amplified whenever tribalism is afoot. And tribalistic mindsets—by definition—do no operate solely at the micro-level. (After all, there is no ethnicity of one.)

More often than not, Reality-denial is a communal act, not an individual act. In serving as a defense mechanism (undertaken to protect that which has been deemed sacrosanct), it upholds that on which the esteem of the group depends. In such cases, the identity of the individual is a function of group-identity. And a collectively-instantiated sense-of-self is intimately tied to that group’s sacred lore; regardless of how

spurious that lore might be. Consequently, members depend on certain (sanctified) dogmas being considered—by themselves AND BY OTHERS—inviolable. This custom-tailored perception of the world—no matter how delusive—is necessary to maintain a sense of existential stability (read: to stave off existential vertigo).

The upshot of this is that ideological revanchism is an expression of IDENTITY. Standing one's ground is a means of orienting oneself in an otherwise bewildering universe.

It comes as no surprise, then, that those who are inextricably wed to this or that dogmatic system—illusory as it might be—are inclined to react with strident defiance to anything that threatens to upend that system (which, to reiterate, undergirds the esteem of the group with which they identify). Staunch vested interests demand nothing less than the preservation of that which serves those interests.

To uphold a consecrated worldview in the face of countervailing evidence, endless rationalization must be employed. When a tribalistic mindset is thoroughly ingrained, an instinctive bias in favor of the “in-group” (and, by implication, its worldview) is virtually irresistible. And so it goes.

This posture—which can quickly translate to pathological obduracy—sets the stage for emotive volatility. For any critique of the beliefs integral to that worldview is taken personally. Indeed, challenges to the ideology are seen as a personal affront (an attack on my beliefs is an attack on ME).

Bringing foundational dogmas into question is tantamount to pulling the rug out from beneath an ideologue's feet. It is inevitable that this will elicit hostility.

Said rationalization goes far beyond run-of-the-mill confirmation bias...or even the sort of choice-supportive bias indicative of post-purchase rationalizations shoppers concoct to make themselves feel justified after the decision the fact. Elsewhere, this has been called “perseverance bias”: Once we settle on a view of the world, we are strongly inclined to stick with it *no matter what*.

Obstinacy (sticking to one's guns come hell or high water) is the hallmark of the True Believer. If forced to confront discordant facts, he will undertake mental acrobatics in order to rationalize ways around it. Once invested, the True Believer is in it for the long haul, come what may. Sticking to one's guns—come hell or high water—is seen as a mark of fidelity, not of obstinacy. Close-minded-ness and bull-headed-ness are taken as signs of dedication, commitment, even COURAGE.

Such biases translate to strict constraints about who is even permitted to discuss the issue-in-question.

In his disquisition on “The True Believer”, Eric Hoffer noted that the zealot is “mentally cocky, and hence barren of new beginnings. At the root of his cockiness is the conviction that life and the universe conform to a simple formula—his formula [i.e. the formula he espouses]. He is thus without the fruitful intervals of groping.” Critical reflection is anathema to the ideologue. This is a necessary prohibition for sustaining the false certainty he so covets.

Once committed to an idea X with sufficient ardor, one will be strongly inclined to stick to one's guns—no matter how erroneous X is shown to be. Confirmation bias goes into overdrive; and objectivity goes out the window. With enough vested interest, obduracy turns into defiance; and the more countervailing one encounters, the more one digs in one's heels.

It is no secret that strong personal bias translates into selectively-adumbrated memory in conjunction with wishful thinking (concerning the present state of affairs as well as about things to come). It's a blissful crucible of delusiveness.

Demagogues can use this to their advantage. Some are calculated in their engineering of False Consciousness. In his landmark work from 1895, “The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind”, proto-fascist thinker Gustave Le Bon cynically noted: “The masses have never thirsted after the truth. Whoever can supply them with illusions is easily their master; whoever attempts to destroy their illusions is always their victim.” (He saw this as an opportunity, not as a tragedy—foreshadowing Machiavellian thinkers like Leo Strauss.)

Meanwhile, those of us interested in elucidating TRUTH are forced to contend with those who are much more interested in upholding sanctified dogmatic systems...which often requires the protection of certain narratives. Removing the “history” label from a sacrosanct etiological myth is no easy task; as one is tampering with the sacred...thereby offending those who bank on things not being tampered with.

But tamper we must.

Though the present task is one of illumination rather than of obfuscation; many would prefer that certain things just be—shall we say—left alone. Broaching contentious subjects (e.g. the dubious credence of the cherished hagiography of a folk-hero) induces what might be called “narrative transition anxiety” (NTA). Indeed, feeling as though one is being pressured into disassociating oneself from a coveted Grand Narrative can be rather disquieting—nay: quite aggravating. This is especially so if it’s the only Grand Narrative one has ever known. Few enjoy being cajoled out of their comfort zone; and nobody likes to feel as though they are being coerced into relinquishing something into which copious amounts of time / energy / emotion have been invested. Consequently, anyone considering such a transmutation will probably experience NTA. And anyone seeking to instigate such a transmutation in others will surely be confronted with an epidemic of NTA—and thus a prodigious amount of push-back. I have sympathy for this condition...up to a point. Indeed, pulling the proverbial rug out from beneath another’s feet can be construed as an untoward gesture: gratuitous or even mean-spirited. Religionists of ANY stripe will surely feel existentially marooned (or even lost at sea, in turbulent waters) should they be deprived of a Weltanschauung on which they’ve come to depend for existential ballast. We should have sympathy for THEM; but not for their delusions.

For an accessible discussion of self-deception, see Robert Trivers’ “Folly Of Fools”.* As Trivers put it, “A very disturbing feature of overconfidence is that it often appears to be poorly associated with knowledge. That is, the more ignorant the individual, the more confident he or she may be” (p. 14). Thus confidence is generally proportional to the severity of the delusion—as Socrates tried to demonstrate 24 centuries ago. The worst kind of ignorance, he noted, was ignorance of one’s own ignorance.

In his book, Trivers noted: “Once information [about the outside world] arrives in our brains, it is often distorted and biased to our conscious minds [according to our sensibilities / interests]. We deny the truth to ourselves. We project onto others [unpalatable] traits that are in fact true of ourselves—and then attack them. We repress painful memories, create completely false ones, rationalize immoral behavior, act repeatedly to boost positive self-opinion, and show a suite of ego-defense mechanisms.”

Thus, our minds “bias information, from initial avoidance, to false encoding, memory, and logic, to incorrect statements [made] to others—from one end [of the process] to the other. Key mechanisms [for doing this] include denial, projection, and perpetual efforts to reduce cognitive dissonance” (p. 2).

On cognitive dissonance, Trivers points out that “the more a person commits to a position, the more he or she needs to rationalize the commitment; and great rationalization apparently produces greater positive effects” (p. 72). This is the psychological mechanism at work when one makes an imprudent purchase (of

a consumer product that one can't return). Pursuant to such sunk costs, every rationalization will be concocted to make oneself feel justified in the commitment...even when all evidence is to the contrary.

Similar psychological mechanisms are operative when it comes to anyone who has invested a prodigious amount of time / energy / emotion into a certain system of dogmas. While economists refer to it as "sunk costs" (and the ensuing syndrome as "post-purchase bias"), it actually involves a psychical process known as "irrational escalation of commitment" (a.k.a. "commitment bias").

Hidebound ideologues thus "create an artificial world and then choose to live in it" (p. 109). Trivers further explains, "Self-deception is intimately tied to false historical narratives", which are essentially "lies we tell ourselves about our past, usually in the service of self-forgiveness and aggrandizement" (p. 6).

Trivers reminds us that deception "always takes the lead in life while detection of deception plays catch-up. As has been said regarding rumors, the lie is halfway around the world before the truth puts its boots on. When a new deception shows up in nature, it starts in a world that often lacks a proper defense" (p. 7). Regarding the transmission of information (i.e. the propagation of memes): "At every single stage—from its biased arrival, to its biased encoding, to organizing it around false logic, to misremembering and then misrepresenting it to others, the mind continually acts to distort information flow in favor of the [espoused narrative]" (p. 139).

This tendency becomes even more salient when it comes to orality. Most of us are completely unaware of the biasing that takes place during hearing, information processing (a.k.a. encoding), and then in re-telling. All of it is susceptible to self-deception and projection; any part of it may involve cognitive dissonance. "However much we champion freedom of thought, we actually spend much of our time censoring input" and thereby allowing our memory to be distorted in order to suit our own purposes (p. 140).

How does this work? A "quick-biasing procedure is available to us when the information is preferred because it boosts our self-esteem... There are few more powerful forces in the service of self-deception than personal fantasies; so when these are aroused, selective attention is expected to be especially intense" (p. 142). Thus, "many processes of memory can be biased to produce welcome results" while keeping unwelcome results at bay (p. 143).

Trivers concludes: "False historical narratives widely shared within a population can easily be exploited to arouse sentiments in favor of [enmity regarding THE OTHER]. At the same time, political success often may turn on the ability of leaders to arouse the belief in people that something is in their self-interest when it is not" (p. 67). (See the American G.O.P. vis a vis working-class America; and all other forms of right-wing populism.)

In the event that a threshold is passed by which one becomes emotionally vested in X to a sufficiently high degree, one may well defend it to the death—even in the face of overwhelming countervailing evidence. It is with that obduracy that one must contend when brazen enough to question the official narrative.

Exceptionalism tends to require manufactured history: a trumped-up heritage. After all, legacy can be translated to destiny with a little hand-waving. The repercussions of this false pride according to group membership (that is: insecure self-esteem based on tribal affiliation) are clear, especially in the context of tribalism.

Robert Trivers explains: "When a feeling of power [i.e. of "chosen-ness"] is induced in people, they are less likely to take others' [read: outsiders'] viewpoint and are more likely to center their thinking on themselves. The result is a reduced ability to comprehend how others see, think, and feel. Power, among

other things, induces blindness toward others” (FOF, p. 20). Thus tribalism engenders staunch parochialism, fetters open-mindedness, and severely attenuates empathy.

The staunch vested interest a dogmatist has in upholding is sacrosanct “truths” precludes him from engaging in an sober, objective critical analysis. He is constitutionally predisposed to not be open-minded and impartial. A prime case-study of this is addressed in my essay: “The Forgotten Diaspora”, which describes a Jewish diaspora that was forgotten BY DESIGN. This is a reminder that those who deign to re-write history tend to do so for readily-identifiable ideological reasons.

After GENERATIONS of assiduous archeological activity, not a shred of evidence for Biblical verity has been discovered in the Levant. YET, there is an extremely well-funded effort by ardent ideologues to find something—ANYTHING—that might possibly, kinda-sorta seem to corroborate this or that morsel of folklore.

Anyone who is even remotely familiar with the archeological record knows that the Exodus never happened, and that the wall of Jericho collapsed due to an earthquake centuries before Joshua would have lived. The closest revisionists ever came to a discovery that might have served their ideological agenda was the site at “Khirbet Qeiyafa” near the seacoast...which, to their chagrin, turns out to have been built by NON-Hebrew Canaanites. (I explore other archeological discoveries in my essay on the history of Jerusalem: “City Of The Beloved”.)

False certainty precludes free inquiry. Investment in X precludes one from being able to assess X objectively. It should go without saying that insights about indoctrination (of any kind) can be proffered by the indoctrinated. What the indoctrinated CAN provide is their own testimony, which itself (tacitly, though not explicitly) DESCRIBES their indoctrination. The rest is for impartial observers to sort out. Testimonies of the True Believer can only ever give us the outlines of the belief in question; they contribute nothing to an AUDIT OF those beliefs.

A program for assessing things can't be used to assess itself. This is one implication of Godel's Incompleteness theorem—whereby a system cannot get outside itself in order to audit itself. (Ludwig Wittgenstein had this insight about the totality of fact / pictures of which the world is comprised.) Put another way: A diagnostics system cannot be used to diagnose ITSELF, as any glitch it may have may itself prevent it from recognizing the glitch. Thus a potentially defective diagnostics system cannot be used to diagnose its own (potential) defects; which explains why paradigms can't be evaluated within themselves.

Alas. Confidence—nay, stridency of conviction—is often inversely proportional to in-touch-ness with Reality. This “Dunning-Kruger Effect” exists because false certainty is one of the hallmark symptoms of ignorance (being as how obliviousness to one's nescience is—in effect—tied into one's out-of-touch-ness with Reality). Here, conviction is proportional to delusion. Confidence is inversely proportional to the warrant for that confidence. When people are thoroughly-enough wed to an idea, they INVARIABLY convince themselves that they are certain. After all, false certainty is a corollary of ideological commitment. The question becomes: How do we handle ignorance when those who are most ignorant believe themselves to be (uniquely) “in the know”?

Those without wisdom lack the wisdom necessary to recognize their own lack of wisdom. Their ignorant state entails seeing that state as erudite: an integral part of ignorance is ignorance of one's own ignorance. Senescence often construes itself as sapience—like the faulty diagnostics system that diagnosis itself as operating splendidly.

The Dunning-Kruger effect is exacerbated in cases where a tribalistic mindset is involved (as tribal honor needs to be upheld). And it is especially pronounced when the conviction is doctrinal (when that which is sacrosanct needs to be protected). After all, to be doctrinaire is to be blinded by own's own ideological commitment. Hence the Dunning-Kruger effect is most severe when it is undergirded by cult activity.

Embellishments (especially those that are self-serving) have a ratcheting effect: once a meme is instantiated in one's sacred lore, it is almost impossible to rescind. Once firmly in place, it tends to calcify; and the surrounding lore becomes more and more dependent on it remaining "as is" ...lest the dogmatic house of cards risk collapsing entirely. As I discuss here, the meme "Land of Israel" has come to enjoy an indelible place in modern Jewish vernacular. However, the term's existence obfuscates key historical facts; and only serves to mislead. For Revisionist Zionists, this is precisely the point, as the term makes the supposition that the Abrahamic deity is a real-estate agent all-the-more-plausible. In other words: It has ideological utility; as it makes it easier to pretend the Torah is a title-deed. Ancient folklore can thus be invoked to justify present-day territorial claims.

It is easy to suppose that the current (favored) semiotic reflects the way things have always been. In my essay, "The Progressive Case For Cultural Appropriation", I discuss how this occurs with iconography. The so-called "Star of David" was a medieval development; appropriating a symbol that had been used for over a thousand years in other contexts. The original Judaic symbols were a menorah and a lion. Hence: Two instances of supplanted iconography. Note below the menorah used on the Triumphal Arch of Titus from the 1st century; then the Lion Of Judah used in a mosaic (depicting the anointment of David) at Dura-Europos from the early 3rd century:

Through Late Antiquity, these were the two symbols most associated with Judaism.

So what of the hexagram? That symbol has a long history. The Shinto (Japanese) Kagome crest dates back to the 5th century B.C. The Hindu "Cakrasvara Tantra" (which uses the hexagram to symbolize Vajrayogini in a tantric mandala) dates from the late 8th century A.D. (Meanwhile, the "Shatkona" uses the hexagram to represent the union ["ardhana-rish-vara"] of Purusha and Prakriti (alt. Shiva and Shakti / Parvati); as used by the Kushans. The symbol is also used for the "Anahata".) The first appearance of the "Magen David" in Judaic material occurs in the Masoretic "Leningrad Codex" from the early 11th century.

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Today, unscrupulous historical revisionists proceed as follows: This is how we think of things now; so we must pretend that that's how it's always been. We haven't altered anything. Canaan has always been "eretz Israel"; just as Yah-weh decreed thousands of years ago.

In the end, people will believe what they are determined to believe. Those with the gall to upset sacred apple-carts will be vilified. By whom? Well, by those who depend on those apple-carts for a sense of existential orientation. Curious inquirers should not be deterred by such obdurate revanchism; as obsequious-ness has no role in scholarship.

{ On this matter, Scott Atran's "In Gods We Trust" and Adrian Bardon's "The Truth About Denial" are also worth reading. Akerlof and Shiller's "Phishing For Phools" makes some fascinating points about mass-manipulation; as does Robert Cialdini's "Influence". When it comes to how people process information, another interesting read is Daniel Kahneman's "Thinking Fast And Slow".}*

*{** The synagogue at Capernaum in Galilee (erected c. 400) has carvings of both pentagrams and hexagrams—indicating that various symbols (including both five- and six-pointed stars) were used at the time. Another Galilean ruin (from around the same time) has a stone in one of its arches in which some sort of hexagram seems to have been engraved. The symbol was clearly not the pre-eminent icon for Judaism in Late Antiquity.}*