

Selective History & Distortions: Jordan's Politicized Archeology

by ADAM J. SACKS

In the case of Israel's neighbor and almost physical doppelgänger, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, it seems that the colder the peace the less it is discussed. Remarkably stable for the region, Jordan rarely makes headlines. The comparative absence of volatility in this Western-oriented monarchy due, in no small part, to its serving as a security buffer for Israel. On the other hand, it is almost unfathomable to imagine King Abdullah II uttering the recent words of President Abdul Fatah al-Sisi in Egypt: "If Jews return, we will build synagogues." First, Jordan didn't really have a recent historical Jewish community of any note. Second, much of what is today Jordan was either historically part of Jewish territory or was earmarked to be such again. Even during the Hellenistic period, the city of Amman was governed by the Jewish Tobiad clan.

[It should also be recalled that "Transjordan," had originally been part of the British Mandate for Palestine, anointed as such by the League of Nations. None other than Winston Churchill proposed and enacted the rupture of Jordan therefrom as an independent Arab province as compensation for Great Britain's World War I alliance with the Hashemite clan of the Hejaz, far away on the Arabian Peninsula. Their "revolt in the desert" against the Ottoman overlords was in pursuit of an ultimate dream – one large Arab kingdom centered around Damascus. This was dashed by the Western powers in post-war diplomacy. Churchill also acceded to the elimination of Hebrew as an official language in Jordan as well as an absolute bar on Jewish migration to the area.]

For the history buff, though, Jordan is a fount of Jewish experience, for both archeological excavation and memory-building exercises.

■ *Silence on This, but Not That*

All this and the de facto peace make the silence on all things Jewish and Israeli even more deafening and confounding. Any mention of such things, whether in contemporary tourism or historical maps, seems strictly taboo. The majority of Jordan's population is Palestinian Arab, with that culture firmly embedded in the everyday life of the country. So, any enforcement apparently requires little push from above. Israel is never seen on any map, nor on graphics that depict the region, from those offered in hotels to souvenir stores, nor even on archeological markers paid for USAID, which also dutifully support the prohibition on saying the

anymore?" And he responded, "This is Palestine." It should also be mentioned that a cross marking the spot of the recognized baptism site had been officially and recently removed by the relevant Jordanian authority. Unlike on the Israeli side, literally a stone's throw away, pilgrims here are neither invited nor allowed to follow in the path of John the Baptist and submerge into the river.

In stark contrast, the memory of Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein appears empathically cosseted. Apparently embraced as a champion of the Palestinians and confronter of the West, one greater even than Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser, it is hard to drive for more than ten minutes without seeing his silhouette embossed on the back of a car or truck. His image is occasionally even paired with that of Adolf Hitler. On-street booksellers seem to find the pairing of Saddam biographies with that of Hitler's manifesto, *Mein*

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forbidden name: identification of the territory that in reality is Israel invariably reads "Palestine."

At times this obsessive denialism can seem delusional and even comic. Right across the Jordan River, near the spot Christians world-wide revere as the baptismal site of Jesus, literally facing and pointing to an Israeli flag, I asked a tour guide, "So, that's not Jordan

Kampf, good for business. Sometimes these works appear along with texts that claim to reveal "the secrets of the Talmud." Given all this, as well as the long-shared border and history, one could presume that at least a few of the many possibilities for mentioning Israel or the Jews would be taken advantage of. That is why the looming shadow of things once present is so glaring.



Some of the books for sale on the streets of Jordan. (Photo: Adam J. Sacks)

■ The Second Jewish Commonwealth

However, the silence is not total. The deep historical past is not entirely suppressed by disdain and neglect of all traces Jewish. The overarching exception to the rule is both strong and compelling, namely the last time Jews had power in the region. This was during the so-called Second Commonwealth of the Kingdom of Judea. [The years in questions are generally agreed to span from 142 BCE until 92 CE: Judea received quasi-independence from the Seleucid Greeks in 142 BCE with the assumption of the office of prince and High Priest by Simon and ends with the last king of the Herodian line, Agrippa II. He ruled largely over non-Jews including some who lived in what is current-day Jordan and actually opposed the Jewish revolt against Rome. He died in approximately 92 CE.] This is so interesting in part because this often runs counter to Jewish memory, which in its religious vein chooses to focus on the Biblical Davidic kingdom or in its secular variant fastens firmly onto the secular and modern Zionist narrative of redemption.

Modern Zionism and the necessities of life in the Anglo-Christian Diaspora did however import an outsize influence to the Hanukkah story of the Maccabees, which it scarcely had before. Strangely enough, Jews do not include the books of the Maccabees in the Tanakh while they serve decisive theological importance for Catholicism, particularly for the church doctrinal matters of the sacrifice of martyrs and the intercession of saints.

Some Zionists of the Revisionist tendency, following Vladimir Ze'ev Jabotinsky, did seize upon the Judaic expansions of this Second Commonwealth period to solidify a claim to the East Bank as well as to the land west of the Jordan River. Jewish historians have hotly debated the achievements and the disorders of the Hasmonean state, and its reputation in the religious world is even more sour as, in contravention of Jewish law, later rulers of the Maccabean line, usurped the priesthood as well as the monarchy, abrogating the legitimate Aharonic and Davidic lineages, respectively. Though Herod himself lay siege to Jerusalem, apparently desecrating the tombs of David and Solomon, the substantial world-historical achievements

of this dynasty are far more verifiable than any of those of the Davidic line centuries before.

From Alexander the Great until the Caesars of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, under a Jewish banner lay the strongest and most independent state in what we now know as the Middle East (excepting Persia, which of course was an empire to rival Greece and Rome in its own right.) Half of this time, an independent Hellenistic state and the other half a client state and then province of the Roman Empire, this Jewish history in Judea is in many ways remarkably a modern mirror of our own times. In some ways it seems that the Jordanian authorities are more well aware of this than their Jewish counterparts.

■ Modern Jordan's Message

When examining this sole mention of the Jews in the Hashemite Kingdom, one cannot escape the impression that Jordanians are really talking about the contemporary State of Israel, and that they are using a not-so-highly encrypted form of code language. The sum effect of their approach here, I would argue, is nothing less than an alarming call for those who might prefer to dwell on the assumption that historical impressions of the Jews highlight spiritual ethics or progressive cosmopolitanism. Leaving aside for the moment questions of historical veracity, the overall message given is that the late twentieth century is not the first time Jews were seen as oppressors in the Middle East.

To begin with, a summary of the Jordanian interpretation of classical era Judea: Recurring if not defining characteristics were the refusal to make due with a small state, a persistent problem of militancy, the tendency to make war on neighboring Arabs and service as a client state to greater powers from outside the region. Sound familiar? In summary, the Maccabean state, ultimately succeeded by a dynasty derived from the forcibly converted Idumean peoples (living on the present-day territory of Jordan) though it flew a Jewish banner,



Anti-western pro-Saddam Hussein demonstrations in Amman, Jordan, during the gulf crisis in 1990. (Photo: Barry Lewis / Alamy)

represented, in the eyes of its neighbors, unwelcome forces of modernity and imperialism, rather than piety or monotheistic morality.

For a deeper look, consult the description inside Jordan's first archeological museum on the grounds of the citadel on the summit of the capital city of Amman:

After the Seleucids achieved domination over the entire area from the late 3rd Century BC onwards, the militant Hasmonean Jews rose up against Greek domination and established their own reign in Palestine and the Northern part of Jordan. Most of the Greek cities welcomed the Roman army headed by General Pompey as a liberator from Jewish oppression...

In what I can confirm is the only instance of the use of the word "Jewish"

at any of Jordan's many historical sites, it appears only as an adjective modifying the word "oppression." One can find another depiction of Judea as a ruthless, imperialist state inside the renovated museum at Petra, the world heritage site recently awarded the title of new Wonder of the World. In Jerash, one of the most extraordinary Roman city ruins in the world, which was once a part of the Hasmonean kingdom and included synagogues, mention of any of the Jewish connection is conspicuously absent to the point of not labeling a location where historians agree a synagogue surely stood:

Aretas II first minted coins, during his reign Alexander Jannaeus was King of Judah and he was a ruthless ruler who sought to expand and strengthen the territories of Judah. Around 100 BC he took control of Gaza and

though the people of Gaza asked for Aretas' help it came too late.

Not just oppressive but also led by a "ruthless" ruler and the echo of a beleaguered and besieged Gaza is hard not to cross-reference against contemporary events. It would be surprising if the effect were entirely unintentional.

Describing the peaceful, wealthy and diplomatic regime of the proto-Arabic Nabatean peoples (who spoke an early Arabic language and migrated from the Arabian Peninsula northward over centuries) in contrast to the warlike, expansionist Herodians, the permanent exhibit goes onto recount:

King Herod the Great invaded twice, second time taking control of large parts of the country... Aretas IV whose daughter married Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great.

Herod Antipas later divorced Phasaelis in order to marry his brother's wife Herodias, mother of the famed Salome, who danced for Herod and in return asked for the head of John the Baptist on a platter. The shamed Phasaelis fled back home to Petra, escorted by Nabatean guard. Aretas IV, angered by the snub, sent an army to invade Herod's territory and captured large parts of it along the west bank of the Jordan river.

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■ *The Message Continues*

So, it appears that duplicity and decadence can be added to the cycle of war, revenge and retribution between the Judeans and the proto-Arabs in the last century before the Common Era. Left entirely unmentioned is the significant Jewish community of Petra which undoubtedly contributed to its famous flourishing. Some recent ethnographers have even claimed that the Bedouin of Petra have verifiable Israelite ancestral trace markers.

Jordanian authorities see fit here to refer only to the infamous tale of Salome and John the Baptist. Largely derived from New Testament Gospel accounts, some would even claim the origins of Christian and therefore global anti-Semitism began with the villainous portrayal of the Herodians depicted there. Putatively secular modern European culture would also find its uses for these tales. Richard Strauss in his 1905 opera of Salome used the Judean court of Herod as a template to depict "female hysteria" and critique the decadence of European society brought on, so the implication goes, by the pernicious influence of the Jews and especially their sexually uninhibited women.

Perhaps even more remarkable is that archeologists now claim to have found the palace site at which that infamous tale actually may have taken place. Machareus, the fortified hilltop Herodian palace lies barely 20 miles from the Jordan River and the border with Israel. Especially remarkable is that this palace was first constructed by the Hasmoneans and then revamped by Herod the Great precisely to oversee territories on the east bank of the Jordan. Excavated and digi-

tally reconstructed by a Hungarian team just a few years back, the site naturally carries special significance for Christians. It would also not be farfetched to speculate that were Machareus to lie within Israel it surely would be one of the main sites of archeological pilgrimage. As it is now in Jordan, this site lies on ab-

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solutely none of the major or even minor tourist itineraries and the one hotel once intended to accommodate visitors here lies a ruin. What few informational placards exist on the site make no explicit mention of the Kingdom of Judea or the Judaic character of the site.

■ *What to do With the Picture*

When we are offered a composite picture by Jordanian archeological authorities of this classical history we are left with the impression a Jewish entity that refused to make due with a small state and had a particular tendency to make war on

its peaceable proto-Arabian neighbors. Furthermore, it had to grapple with the problem of the growing militancy of its population and the persistent ruthlessness of its leaders. All the while, even though flying a Jewish banner, it was perceived as a client state of a foreign power that stood for westernization and modernity, in this case Rome, whose global hegemony the Jews were seen to serve.

As disturbing a picture as this might appear, sometimes one's reflection in the eyes of one's neighbor is worth consultation and consideration. One would avoid the presence of this selective history only at considerable peril. Entirely overlooked are the considerable technological and cultural achievements of Herod's Judea, which was often seen as the significant junior partner in Caesar Augustus's Pax Romana.

This is literally the long and the short of what any otherwise uninformed visitor to Jordan would have to learn about the Jews and Jewish history. As a warning from the past as well as the present, sober narratives of the perils of power might reinforce the exigency of good neighborliness. But just as much

they could be ample fodder for intransigent prejudice. It is a warning from the past, as well as the present, that a formal peace without historical enlightenment and lacking popular support will be understood in the skewed language of an "old" Middle East, not the "new."

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