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It's wrong to use history to serve political narratives

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It's wrong to use history to serve political narratives

[Hussein Ibish](#)[2]

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Virtually every contemporary national project tries to exploit ancient history, traditions and legends to justify its own agenda and discredit opposing ones. Examples can be found the world over. But it's hard to identify a starker instance than the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its competing narratives.

When Mahmoud Abbas, the president of the Palestinian Authority, referred to Jesus in his recent Christmas greeting as a "Palestinian messenger", the Israeli government accused him of an "outrageous rewriting of Christian history".

Numerous pro-Israel commentators insisted that "Jesus was a Jew," and that this only underscores the ancient Jewish connection to the land versus the supposedly tenuous Arab one.

Accepting, for the sake of argument, the traditionally-inherited histories about Jesus, both sides are right and wrong, factually and, especially, politically.

Israelis and their supporters are right that Jesus was born Jewish. But unless they are converts to Christianity or Islam, they accord him no religious significance. Jewish Israelis are on very shaky ground pointing to Jesus as a proto-Israeli, or anything other than a very heretical Jew at best.

Palestinians can make the counterargument that Jesus was the founder of Christianity, and that while he was born Jewish he became the first Christian, and was later identified as a prophet of Islam. Since the Christians and Muslims of the land almost entirely identify as Palestinians, by that logic Jesus was a proto-Palestinian.

Except that this is all historical, intellectual and political rubbish from both sides. No one can deny the deep Jewish history and emotional connection to this land in general. Still less can one deny not only the deep Palestinian history and presence on the land, but even more specifically, their emotional connection to individual homes in particular villages, whether or not they were destroyed by Israel after 1948.

Many Jews yearned, and some still do, for a generalised territory called the "Land of Israel." Palestinians yearn for that same land, and also particular houses at specific addresses, many of which do not exist anymore, but for which they still cherish the old iron keys.

But the contemporary Zionist idea is only about 100 years old, and the Palestinian national project younger still. In the 1930s, the word "Israeli" meant nothing at all. It did not exist. And the word "Palestinian" typically referred to British colonial institutions, not the Arab population of the country.

To be sure the words “Jew” and “Arab” have much longer histories. But both have been utterly transformed in their generally understood meaning over the past century, although few bother to trace the crucial transformations of these surprisingly unstable and contested identity categories.

Meanwhile, elaborate narratives have been constructed across vast sweeps of history to justify each national project and delegitimise the other.

Israelis and many other contemporary Jews see themselves as the living embodiment of those ancient histories, traditions and legends. Moreover, they dismiss Palestinians as relative latecomers.

Palestinians, by contrast, tend to see themselves as the aggregate descendants of all the peoples of the ancient and contemporary history of the land, including biblical Hebrews. And they tend to cast the Jewish Europeans who founded Israel as usurping colonists from the 20th century with probably little or no direct lineal descent from the ancient peoples of the area.

Given these narratives, it comes naturally to Palestinian Muslims and Christians to see Jesus as a key forebear, while many Jewish Israelis take umbrage.

Meanwhile, in pride of place at prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s office is a recently discovered 2,000-year-old Hebrew seal bearing the name “Netanyahu.” He wastes no opportunity in presenting it, and pointing out that his own name is also “Netanyahu.”

Except it’s hardly so straightforward. His grandfather, Nathan Mileikowsky, used “Netanyahu” as a pen name, and his father Benzion formally changed Mileikowsky to Mr Netanyahu when he moved to mandatory Palestine in the 1920s.

Mr Netanyahu may think he’s demonstrating some great historical continuity, but his gesture only highlights the conscious, artificial and carefully constructed appropriation of the past inherent in most contemporary ethnic national narratives. One could hardly ask for a better example of this cynical bunkum.

Except, perhaps, the ridiculous tug-of-war between Palestinian Muslims and Christians versus Jewish Israelis over Jesus. If one believes the traditions, then Jesus was born a Jew, but became the first Christian and a crucial Muslim prophet. Does that make him an emblem of Israel, or of Palestine?

The only rational answer is: neither. For nothing that took place, and no one who lived, 2,000 years ago actually has anything to do with contemporary political movements constructed in living memory to serve the present needs of modern constituencies.

All efforts to appropriate ancient history, traditions, myths and legends to serve contemporary political purposes ought to be immediately recognised for what they are: a grotesque and manipulative shell game.

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