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Zionism as Colonialism:
A Comparative View of Diluted
Colonialism in Asia and Africa

Introduction: The Reputation of Colonialism

Ever since historiography was professionalized as a scientific discipline, historians have considered the motives for mass human geographical relocations. In the twentieth century, this quest focused on the colonialist settler projects that moved hundreds of thousands of people from Europe into America, Asia, and Africa in the preceding centuries. The various explanations for this human transit have changed considerably in recent times, and this transformation is the departure point for this essay.

The early explanations for human relocations were empiricist and positivist; they assumed that every human action has a concrete explanation best found in the evidence left by those who performed the action. The practitioners of social history were particularly interested in the question, and when their field of inquiry was impacted by trends in philosophy and linguistics, their conclusion differed from that of the previous generation.

The research on Zionism should be seen in light of these historiographical developments. Until recently, in the Israeli historiography, the

dominant explanation for the movement of Jews from Europe to Palestine in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was—and, in many ways, still is—positivist and empiricist.¹ Researchers analyzed the motives of the first group of settlers who arrived on Palestine's shores in 1882 according to the testimonies in their diaries and other documents. The Palestinian historiography, also in adherence with a positivist and empiricist approach, found ample historical evidence to show that this group of people had a very different set of motives from the one attributed by the Israeli historiography. According to the Israeli interpretation, Zionism was a national liberation movement with a strong socialist past and more recent liberal tendencies that entered its ancient homeland, derelict and empty since the exile of the Jews in Roman time, waiting to be resettled. According to the Palestinian explanation, Zionism was a colonialist movement that penetrated the Palestinian homeland by force, with the wish to colonize the country and with possible expansionist ambitions to penetrate the heart of the Arab world.

What we learn from the updated historiographical debates is that the narratives provided by both sides of the divide in Palestine serve the ideological needs of the present more than they satisfy a scholarly interest in the past. As long as the conflict in the land of Palestine rages on, it may be impossible to find a way out of the present agendas. What is offered here is a fresh look at the historical case of Zionism through a comparative analysis of the movement. Zionism is contextualized here historically and thematically as an unconventional colonialism, diluted by strong nationalist characteristics.

I will argue that Zionist settlers—indeed, Zionist thought and praxis—were motivated by a national impulse but acted as pure colonialists. Such an argument has not been easily accepted until today in the United States and Israel.² The immigration of Jews from (mainly eastern) Europe to the heart of the Arab Middle East is still depicted today in those places as a pure nationalist enterprise, and any attempt to attribute colonialist features to it is rejected out of hand. This is a bewildering phenomenon in the age of professional historiography. Zionism was not, after all, the only case in history in which a colonialist project was pursued in the name of national or otherwise noncolonialist ideals. Zionists relocated to Palestine at the end of a century in which Europeans controlled much of Africa, the Caribbean, and other places in the name of “progress” or idealism not unfamiliar to the Zionist movement. It happened in a century when French settlers

colonized Algeria, claiming an atavist and emotional link to the Algerian soil no less profound than the one professed by the early Zionists with regard to Eretz Yisrael. Similarly, the cynical reassurances of the Zionist settlers to the native population were heard before by British settlers in Africa and Asia. Like the Zionists, the colonies built by Europeans in these continents were allegedly for the benefit of the local people. As it turned out, the colonies became imperialist communities serving only the strategic interests of European powers and the settlers themselves. In the period of the white man's penetration into Africa and Asia, the Jews "returned" to their "homeland."

Israeli historians hesitate to compare early Zionism with colonialism—although they are at least willing in some cases to apply the comparison to the Israeli colonization of the Palestinian areas occupied in 1967—for two principal reasons. First, they wish not to deviate from the empiricist and positivist approach that analyzes the nature of an ideological and human movement according to its declared goals. This is a methodological preference of the Israeli historiography to see the documents written by the forefathers of Zionism prior to the act of settlement as the exclusive historical explanation for the act. With its missionary and socialist overtones, the national discourse of the early Zionists does not include, as a rule, overt colonialist intentions, and thus, the movement cannot be branded as *colonialist*. The second reason is due to the bad reputation of colonialism in our times. Although, as I argue elsewhere, the worst crimes committed by Zionism against the local Palestinians were national in character and not colonialist, it is difficult to convince Palestinian historians that labeling Zionism as *nationalist* or *national* does not absolve it from the accusations of dispossession and occupation.

In the 1990s, a more critical Israeli historiography challenged the established narrative and offered a less patriotic deconstruction of the texts of such thinkers as Arthur Rubin, Menachem Ussishkin, and Otto Warburg. They were introduced in the new works as conventional examples of European colonialists who came to settle in Palestine's "*terra nullius*" and fight against mosquitoes, swamps, and the indigenous population. Baruch Kimmerling and Gershon Shafir led the thinking in a new direction. Kimmerling saw Zionism as a mixture of territorial nationalism with colonialism, and Shafir depicted early Zionism as a clear variant of colonialism.³ Against them, the more established historians continue to argue that Zionism is a pure nationalist movement with no colonialist features. Israeli histori-

ans such as Anita Shapira, Ran Aaronson, and others have examined the mechanism of settlement in the Palestinian land and labor markets and concluded that it was motivated and enacted as a national project, innocent of any colonialist impulse.⁴

In this essay, I try to understand the interplay of nationalism and colonialism by comparing Zionism to nineteenth-century European colonialism in order to find out how unique, or how conventional, Zionism was as a colonialist project.

Methodology

In the search for comparative cases, the natural choice would have been national colonialism of the kind that produced the nation-states of Australia, New Zealand, and those in North and South America. But in these cases, British, Spanish, and Portuguese nationals were sent by a mother country and then rebelled against it. I seek a movement that had no clear mother country and went across the world in order to fulfill a vision of a return to an ancient homeland, as if it were a national movement but in reality had to dispossess other people and, therefore, essentially became a colonialist project.

At first, these impulses to move had little to do with the wish to colonize but rather indicated a strong desire to build an ideal life. The territorialization, mainly the choice of Palestine, transformed Zionism from a national project into a colonialist one. I found two cases that fitted this paradigm: the pre-Zionist Christian colonization of Palestine (referred to here as the “peaceful crusade”) and the Basel Mission’s colonization of West Africa. The former began in the 1850s and ended just before the Zionists arrived in Palestine, and the latter commenced in 1820 and lasted until 1950.

I will compare these historical cases in three dimensions: self-image, discourse, and praxis on the ground. These three aspects are examined in relation not only to the local population but also to an adopted mother country that served temporarily as a metropole. In these cases, as in Zionism, regardless of the motivations or intentions, alleged or otherwise, the three dimensions appear to be clearly colonialist. It means that the isms in this essay, such as colonialism, socialism, and nationalism, are treated not only as ideologies but as settlers’ interpretations of the reality that is manifested in their self-images, discourses, and action. The features of the settlers’ world vary in nature: they can be the colonies themselves, the textbooks

of the settlers' educational system, the economic praxis, and so on. They are established according to nationalist impulse in the case of Zionism and missionary zeal in the case of the Christian colonization of Palestine and the Basel Mission's West African colonization, but they all become pure colonialist tools when actually implemented. Thus, for instance, a kibbutz symbolized a wish to lead a collective life, but in the way it was constructed in the early twentieth century, it broadcast a wish to defend an aggressive settlement against a local population and a wish to utilize that space economically.

The "Peaceful Crusade" and Its Impact

The pre-Zionist European attempts to settle in Ottoman Palestine warrant a comparison to Zionism if only due to similar territorial and chronological frameworks. Moreover, as they preceded Zionism and there is no known challenge to their depiction as colonialism, they may have also influenced, as a colonialist phenomenon, Zionism.

The German settler Hermann Guthe described them as *friedlichen Kreuz-zuges* ("peaceful crusade"), and they were motivated by the wish to return the Holy Land to Christian hands but not in the brutal manner of the Crusades.⁵ The peaceful "redemption" seemed to Catholics and Protestants—as fitting the divine apocalyptic scheme that would include also the return of the Jews to Palestine—similar to their conversion to Christianity that would in turn precipitate the second coming of the Messiah. This millenarianist idea aided, and disguised, the economic interests and strategic ambitions of European powers in the area. The main drive was to have as many strongholds as possible in the heart of the disintegrating Ottoman Empire.

This crusade began by pilgrimages and joint journeys to the Holy Land and ended in the attempt to establish colonies. Among the first who tried to settle in Palestine was Victor Guérin, a famous French explorer of the land. In his writings, he predicted the creation of Christian colonies, and to that end he toiled over mapping the land and meticulously studying its history and ethnography. His coveted aspirations were almost identical to those expressed by Ussishkin, one of the leading early Zionists, who like Guérin was a studious explorer of the land and its history. Guérin wished to revive the crusaders' kingdoms, while Ussishkin dreamed of resurrecting the biblical empire of King David.⁶

Both the peaceful crusaders and the Zionists were primarily, and initially, troubled by the question of acquiring land; here the projects became colonialist. The Promised Land, in national or religious terms, had to be bought or forcefully taken from the local population. The Christian and Zionist colonialists were approaching the problem in similar ways. Purchase of land itself was described by both groups as “redemption.” In 1948, when the Zionist movement took over most of the land of historical Palestine by force, it was still referred to as “redemption” of the land. However, in the nineteenth century, the settlers of both movements bought the land and did not expel anyone directly from it. This was due more to the lack of ample means to carry out such a forceful eviction and less because of any moral considerations. Ussishkin’s words echo the feelings of the peaceful crusaders regarding this question: “The whole of Palestine, or at least most of it, must belong to the Jewish people. . . . this can be achieved by three means: by force, but we do not have it, governmental coercion or purchase.”⁷ Out of the three, only purchasing the land was possible in the late nineteenth century. Possessing the land was a national or religious mission, but the means were colonialist.

Always lurking, of course, was the issue of the fate of the local population, once the land had been successfully obtained. At the outset this was not supposed to be a question of great significance. Seen from the perspective of the initial impulse to settle in Palestine, the missionaries and the Zionists regarded the native population as marginal. The locals were hardly there in the early visions of the future, as apparent in the utopian novel written by the founder of Zionism, Theodor Herzl. For Guérin, too, the locals were to disappear into oblivion once progress and modernity impressed themselves on the newfound land of Palestine. Whatever would happen to them paled in comparison to the advantage of the peaceful crusade or Zionism, the forces that would make the arid land blossom and transform the country into a civilized European entity.

But there was no way of ignoring the Palestinians. They were needed for their knowledge of the land, and they had to be considered when they forcefully rejected any attempt to take over their homeland. In view of the reality, and not the vision, the German colonialists advocated exploitation of the locals for the benefit of the enterprise and not expulsion. *Heilige Land*, a German journal, promised its readers that the peasants in Palestine would be happy to sell their lands in return for bread and protection.⁸ This was condoned more crudely by Claude Conder, the head of the Palestine

Exploration Fund, who proposed to turn the locals into carvers of wood and fetchers of water.⁹

However, there were others who talked about dispossession. Some leading members of the German missionaries advocated transferring the indigenous population. For instance, during the tenth convention of the Catholic societies in Germany, in 1855, most participants spoke of a “missed opportunity” when referring to a failure to uproot the local population in Palestine during the Crimean War, thereby paving the way for the creation of a pure Christian state there.¹⁰ Peaceful crusaders such as Scottish philanthropist Lord Laurence Oliphant also advocated expulsion. Oliphant wanted to establish a sort of a colony in Balqa in Transjordan and suggested imprisoning the local nomads in reservations, such as ones prepared for Native Americans, so that law and order could be guaranteed for the settlers. Oliphant would have a considerable influence on the Zionist movement. Some of his ideas for the colonization of the land would become Zionist projects, such as drying out Hula Lake to make it suitable for European settlement and driving away the seminomads who lived around it. These proved to be successful capitalist projects but ecological disasters.¹¹

As mentioned, the leaders of the Zionist movement spoke more openly about dispossessing and exiling the locals. Isaac Rolf, a leading German Zionist rabbi, called for the expulsion of the locals from the land:

For the time being we only talk on settlement and only on settlement and this is indeed our near aim. We talk only on that. But it must be clear as “England is only for the English, Egypt for the Egyptians, Judea is for the Jews.” In our land there is only room for us. We will say to the Arabs: move, and if they disagree, if they resist by force—we will force them to move, we will hit them on their heads and force them to move.¹²

Every articulation of dispossession can be juxtaposed with one of exploitation. Exploitation was always presented as a wish to advance modernization in the native local population. Ussishkin can be found advocating both. This ambiguity between the wish to expel and exploit as part of a desire to modernize produced in both cases concepts such as temporary exploitation. The Zionist movement wished to take over the labor and land markets but could not yet do it, so exploitation had to be temporary. Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, the second president of Israel, and David Ben-Gurion, one of the leaders of the early Zionist settlers, explained it well when developing the concept of

avoda ivrit, “Hebrew labor.” According to Ben-Zvi, “My hope is that in due course we will grasp the decisive place in the Palestine economy and in its collective and social life.”¹³ It is obvious who was to occupy the marginal role in the economy: the Palestinians who formed the vast majority of the population at the time. Ben-Zvi was a leading member of Hapoel Hazair, which formed the nucleus for the future labor movement. His colleagues’ written legacies are far more colonialist than his. One of these colleagues, Yaakov Rabinowitz, saw no contradiction in heading a seemingly socialist movement such as Hapoel Hazair and arguing for a segregated, colonialist labor market: “The Zionist establishment should defend the Jewish workers against the Arab one, as the French government protects the French colonialists in Algeria against the natives.”¹⁴ But the impurity of his colonialism and his colonialist discourse appear in this statement: “And as other governments defend their workers against Chinese cheap laborers.”¹⁵

Ben-Zvi talked about temporary exploitation; when not contemplating expulsion, Ussishkin desired a superior role that would be recognized by the Semites of the east because of the racial similarities between the Jews and the Arabs. This would make Zionism a positive kind of colonialism:

I have seen the colonies of the English in Egypt. The English introduced there their own administration and Capitalism. . . . but if you ask the Arabs, do they want to live under England’s rule, you will get a negative answer since the English are only looking for their own good and not that of the local people. Our role should be entirely different. With this old world, the world of the East, we should unite. We should bring them, our brethren to the race, a real culture, a culture of existence not a fictional one. We should solve the problem of the East.¹⁶

In a similarly self-praising fashion, principal spokespersons of the Basel Mission asserted that they had brought a fair and attractive gospel for the locals in comparison to those of other colonialists. Conrad Schick, for instance, the German demographer, who was mainly busy preparing a master plan for the Christian colonization of the country—namely, a massive transfer of European immigrants to the land—believed that his schemes were the only way to improve the agricultural conditions of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants.¹⁷

Among the peaceful crusaders, one group deserves particular attention—the Templers, who operated in Palestine from 1868 until the arrival

of Zionism in 1882. They were a typical product of the Protestant Pietist movement that appeared in the seventeenth-century German state of Württemberg. This movement sought to arrest the modernization of religion, cut short the way to doomsday, and prepare the believers for the second coming of the Messiah. It also regarded the Industrial Revolution as heresy and a threat. These beliefs were commonly accepted by the more traditional sections of the German-speaking Protestant society. It was particularly popular in Württemberg, which was a predominately rural state without many progressive urban centers. In Württemberg, Pietism bred the Templers' movement.

The Templers' first mission was to buy land, which was possible until the second half of the nineteenth century. In the mid-nineteenth century, land was privatized in the Ottoman Empire. What had been state land (quite often leased rather than directly owned) was transferred to the local elite. Much of the land coveted by foreigners in Palestine belonged to absentee landlords in neighboring countries who were quite eager to sell the land to Germans and Jews. This was done regardless of the nearly ownership position of their tenants, who had been living there for centuries.

There were other common features with Zionism. The attitude and depiction of the locals as almost absent or marginal and a great belief in agricultural innovations (one that benefited mainly the settlers and not the local population) were the two salient similarities. Also similar was a discourse of "return" to a holy land that was "theirs" by divine right and had been "empty" for two millennia.¹⁸

The Basel Mission

Diluted, or "exceptional," colonialism was not particular to the Zionist movement or limited to Palestine itself. It can be found in the missionary Protestant colonization in Asia and Africa. Protestant missionary work in general, be it British or German, is worthy of comparison with Zionism for two main reasons. First, such missionary work was often colonialist in outlook. In fact, it was realized through massive settlement colonies, whereas Catholic missionary work tended to entrust proselytizing to a chosen few. Protestant missions brought whole families along and employed laypeople as heads of its operations. At the headquarters of the Protestant missions on both sides of the Atlantic, secular leaders were often deeply involved in policy making and execution. Second, it is a valid historical comparison

because of the special role Britain played in the effort to allow the “return” of the Jews to their homeland and bring Christianity to Asia and Africa. This is particularly relevant to Africa, where the two principal colonialist powers, Germany and Britain, used the missionaries to expand their influence. It seems that Britain was exploiting Zionism in a similar way in Palestine as part of the overall drive to take over the Ottoman possessions in the eastern part of the Middle East.

The utilization was mutual. The British Empire needed the missionary network to penetrate Africa, and the missionaries were unable to exist initially without the imperial infrastructure supporting them. This interdependence served Zionism well too. Thus, for a while, Britain was the “mother country” of these two colonialist movements. Eventually, the two movements turned against Britain, but Britain was there for them in the crucial and formative years. For the purposes of this essay, the most relevant of all the missionary groups was the Basel Mission. Before comparing the discourse, symbols, and location within a more conventional definition of colonialism (namely, their relationship to a mother country) of the Basel Mission and Zionism, I will compare the similar historical context in which both movements operated.

The Historical Context

The Basel Mission was founded in 1730 in Basel and simultaneously in some cities in Germany. The founders were Pietists like the Templers who were determined to salvage their society from the perils of industrialization. With a particular religious fervor and a strong collectivist, almost protosocialist enthusiasm, the Basel Mission aspired to produce agricultural collectivism that was to stimulate what it called Christian agriculturalism, a mode of life that signified the purest form of devotion, as it demanded the harshest personal sacrifices from the believer, given the task at hand. As with other Pietists at the time, such positions were unacceptable to the established church, and the missionaries were forced to leave. They were deported first to the Caucasus and then to Africa.¹⁹

The movement of the missionaries to the Caucasus and then to Africa and the arrival of the first Zionists in Palestine were triggered by similar socioeconomic processes. Both in Württemberg and in eastern Europe, the traditional rural areas were badly damaged by industrialization, and the wrath of the local peasants was easily directed toward those sections of

society that were different due to their religious convictions and ways of life. The inability to survive economically and religiously was a powerful factor in both cases.²⁰

This movement out of Europe was not associated with any particular European colonialism or metropolitan state. In all its years of existence, the Basel Mission vacillated among Danish, German, and British colonialism, always preferring London's umbrella to that of the others. The main reason was that its particular brand of agricultural mission work suited the strategic understanding of British colonialism in West Africa. But it was not an ideological affinity. Those working directly for the British Empire pursued policies of modernization abhorred by the missionaries. Members of the Basel Mission saw themselves as the religious victims of rapid urbanization and industrialization advanced by Britain and Germany. Britain had very little interest in or patience with the socialist or Marxist message the Zionists were allegedly bringing to Palestine (although some pious British politicians such as Lloyd George did share the dream of a return to the Holy Land). But the collectivist settlement helped Britain to deepen and expand initial footholds in Palestine and West Africa.

Agricultural collectivism played a major role in both cases. Long before a non-European territory was clearly targeted as an object for colonization, both the Zionists and Basel Mission members tried to live collectively in Europe—the Zionists in the name of socialism and the missionaries in the name of Christ. But the collectives were very similar in structure and ethos. When the pressure to leave grew, due to prosecution and economic hardship, the archetypical models were imported to Palestine and West Africa. Basel Mission members called colonies in West Africa “model villages,” which broadcast an interpretation of Christianity as a combination of family values and commonsensical ecological exploitation of the natural resources. When established in Africa, the villages became typical colonialist communities—similar to today's gated communities.

After their arrival in Africa, the missionary collectivists appealed to the Danish government that had begun to explore West Africa's Gold Coast (what is now Ghana) in the early 1820s. Under Danish auspices, the first Basel colonies were established in that part of the continent. The Basel Mission created a collective settlement of Europeans that aspired both to exploit its new native environment and to serve as a model for it. It was born in a similar cultural context as Zionism—a messianic monotheistic justification of return (which in the case of Zionism was carried out

by secular Jews). The mission expanded its activities beyond Ghana into today's Cameroon and Nigeria.

The "model village" was presented as a means of preserving core African values, but in practice it became a tool for European control and supremacy through agricultural modernization. The declared wish to preserve traditional agricultural values was never even attempted. When the settlements expanded, they became such a powerful factor in the local economy that they turned into a principal employer in the colony. Their arrival thus generated the process of semi-proletarianization in rural Ghana and, to a certain extent, in Cameroon.²¹ Similar processes were created by the agricultural and land policies of the Zionist movement. In Palestine, the process until 1948 was caused by British development policies and Zionist land purchases that rendered agriculture an unsatisfactory source of living. After 1948, the Palestinian minority in Israel and the Palestinians in the occupied territories would undergo similar processes of semi-proletarianization.²²

In Africa, the local population responded ambivalently. Some heads of tribes cooperated and some resisted. As a whole, the environment was hostile. The Ashanti, the strongest tribe in the area, managed to resist the colonialist missionary until 1850. The mission had to wait patiently for British forces to defeat the Ashanti (as the Zionist movement had to wait for Edmund Allenby's victory in the battle for Palestine in World War I). After the missionary colonialist movement was linked with British colonialism, a network of villages was established. In 1850, Britain "bought" Ghana from Denmark and became the law and order in the land.

With this new wind at its back, the mission became more intent on taking over land from the Ashanti. Before they were finally defeated by the British, the Ashanti fought a bitter war. The mission had to wait for the first comprehensive military confrontation between Britain and the kingdom, which raged off and on for thirty-six years (1860–1896). It ended when British troops occupied Kumasi, the kingdom's capital. Kumasi became the mission's principal station. It was completely destroyed when missionaries entered it as a result of the war. The mission also trailed in a similar way behind British successes in Cameroon and Nigeria.

The connection with Britain further weakened the mission's association with Germany and Switzerland. Although its European headquarters remained in Berlin for most of the nineteenth century, the mission belonged to Britain politically. After World War I and the German defeat, the mission moved its headquarters from Berlin to Scotland. Coincidentally, a similar

change in location took place in the Zionist movement, which moved from Berlin to London. The reasons and the motivations were quite the same.

Finally, on this note of comparative historical contexts, it is worth mentioning an important difference between the two. The Basel Mission perceived itself as a tool for building an African Protestant Christianity. For this purpose, it hoped to lead the way for forming new national religions in the emerging colonies in West Africa. It wished to nationalize Christianity for the sake of the local national movements, and in this respect it was very different from Zionism. For Zionism, nationalism meant total alienation from the local people, which eventually led to violent confrontations with them.

However, when viewed through their discourses, symbols, and relationships with Britain, it becomes clear that we are examining two very similar versions of metacolonialist concepts and perceptions.

Discursive and Symbolic Practices

In both movements, discursive attributions to the Bible and agriculture were prominent. The holy book and the plough appear literally and visually in the speeches of the leading members and indirectly in the daily discourse of the grassroots members:²³ West African and Palestinian colonization in the name of religion (the Bible), supported by the force of the “sword” (colonial weaponry). The difference is that in Zionism the land was depicted as a desert made to bloom by Zionism (reincarnating the fertile land of the Bible), while the missionaries effected the wise and ecological cultivation of a very fertile land.

“Return” also occupies a central place in the two movements’ discourses. Zionism referred constantly to the return to the Promised Land, while the Basel Mission stressed a return to the “pure” land (almost in a Rousseauian sense of going back to predecadent civilization or, in this case, a predecadent industrialization). Common to both was the idea that God endowed Africa with natural resources, but only his true believers, or those who were about to become true believers, knew how to properly exploit such resources. This rings very familiar to Ben-Gurion’s utterances on the same subject:

The land is waiting for a cultural, industrious people. Enriched by material and spiritual resources; armed with the weapon of Science

and Technology. The country craves for this people to come and settle in it, bloom its arid mountains, fertilize its uncultivated land, forest its sands and the deserted country would become heaven. . . . The Jews, as can already be seen in their agricultural colonies, will introduce to the land improved tools, updated agricultural methods and develop the land's drainage and transportation systems.²⁴

Whereas "return" in the case of the Basel Mission did not include total dispossession of the local people, in the case of Zionism it was more ambiguous. Ben-Gurion's words refer to Zionism as the harbinger of progress in Palestine for the sake of everyone living there. As he puts it: "Our renaissance in Palestine would be the renaissance of the land; namely that of the Arabs in it."²⁵ A few years later, this sentiment would die, and the major desire of Ben-Gurion and his colleagues was to ethnically cleanse Palestine of its Arab population. This transformation indicated that it was impossible to reconcile the two images of "return" in Zionism: "returning" to the homeland for the sake of progress and enlightenment for the indigenous population, on the one hand, and returning to the land in order to create a pure supremacist state for the newcomers, on the other.²⁶

The various forms of agricultural collectives built by the Zionist settlement (kibbutz, *moshava*, and *moshav*) and the "model villages" erected by the missionaries had much in common. Both outfits were meant at first to serve as an ideal for the world or at least for the closest reference group, Christians or Jews. Then the collectives were seen to serve solely and exclusively the needs of the settlers in a hostile environment. The settlers and missionaries were so overwhelmed by local antagonism and hostility, on one hand, and developed racist attitudes toward indigenous peoples, on the other, that the collectiveness was no more a universal dream but a means of survival for the settlers and missionaries.

Using the collectives as paragons was stressed while the model habitations were experimented with in Europe. For the Zionist models, this continued to be emphasized, as long as the true identity of the Promised Land was unclear. (Uganda, Azerbaijan, and Argentina were three out of many possible destinations, as were several "empty" spaces in the United States.) A group of Jewish settlers also moved by national feeling were building a model village in America. This was the Am Olam (the people of the world) movement, which strove to erect a model agricultural collective in Louisiana. This collective inspired the first model village, Gedera, of the early Zionist settlers (the Biluim).²⁷

There were, of course, stark differences in the ways in which the colonies were run as collective agricultural units. The Basel Mission's recipe for ideal life was agriculture based on the extended family, a limited degree of mechanization, and a Presbyterian way of life. For the Zionists, the Marxist world of sharing means of production, possession, and privilege meant a strong antifamily and, indeed, an antitradition bias. But as in the case of Zionism, missionary collectivism was not just an ideology but was actually the best way to survive in Africa. Living in the early Zionist colonies in Palestine and in the "model villages" of the mission was a colonialist praxis, informed by a colonialist—and not a Christian or a socialist—interpretation of reality. Moreover, for the local people, both Zionism and the Basel Mission were perceived as pure colonialist and the colonies as the principal manifestation of oppression and occupation.

Discursively and symbolically, the two movements were equally troubled by money and the way to deal with its corrupting potential. Anyone wishing to find a connection in the colonialist era between cynical economic considerations and an alleged ethic altruism will benefit from the comparison here. The missionaries were very troubled by their external and internal images, given the obvious affluence of their settlements. The "model villages" proved to be very profitable. However, at first, the Basel Mission claimed that the financial dealings were not for profit but were for self-sufficiency and simple existence. In its early years, the mission, like the Zionist movement, relied mainly on donations from philanthropists abroad and then on the agricultural production of the model villages. But this was soon expanded to other areas, and the mission developed its own banking and commercial systems and established a trade company. When it proved it had the financial ability to maintain its economic independence, it became a sought-after investing market for former missionary groups.²⁸

Actual and symbolic Zionist dealings with finance developed in very similar ways, as can be seen from the thorough research carried out by the Israeli economic historian Nahum Gross. In a 1990 article, he called for another look at the relations between capitalist profit considerations and "Zionist considerations." Gross described the complex relationship among external philanthropy, Zionist and non-Zionist investors, and the political leadership in Palestine. He concluded that the establishment of cooperative unions—the backbone of the agricultural Zionist settlement in rural areas—was a convenient economic substitute for capitalist corporations and not as the Israeli historiography would have it, even today, the

fruit of socialist ideology.²⁹ This echoes points made by both Ernest Gelner and Gershon Shafir regarding the early Zionist socialism as a tactical way to survive in a hostile environment rather than a means of fulfilling utopian socialist dreams.³⁰

The realm of education is another intriguing field of comparison, both in its actual structure and its symbolic content. For the Zionists, education was of the highest priority. Since the British allowed the Zionists to establish an autonomous educational system, while the Palestinian majority was subjected to a typical colonialist educational system, the Jewish community was given a crucial advantage over the local Palestinians. The Zionists then wanted to make education the backbone of the fledgling state.

The impulse in the case of the Basel Mission was different. It also established its own educational system, independent of the colonialist one in West Africa. But it was driven by a fear of the growing power of Islam as an educating force. This anti-Islamic attitude was inherited from the Christian Missionary Society (CMS), which had been working in West Africa before the Basel Mission arrived. A British society, the CMS concocted the ethos of an anticolonialist missionary aimed at salvaging Africa. For the Basel Mission, education was to continue the propagation of trade for the sake of Africa, education for the sake of African nationalism, and agricultural reform for the sake of African peasants, provided all these efforts would be Christian, not Muslim or pagan.

In the Zionist community, education did not have an overt anti-Islamic tone, but the discourse about and images of Muslims were very much the same as those of the Basel Mission. At the height of the anti-Islamic efforts of the CMS and the Basel Mission, during World War I, the language used would be familiar to anyone looking at educational products in the early years of statehood in Israel in the 1950s. The image and perceptions of Islam and Muslims relied, in both cases, on scholarly Western Orientalism.

In the late nineteenth century, the CMS funded anthropological research into West African society. The research concluded that without converting to Christianity the Africans would be unable to integrate in CMS's development efforts: "Christianity and Civilization have to go hand in hand in Africa, if both wish to progress."³¹ In the wake of this slogan, black churches in Canada seriously considered "homecoming."³² The black community in Canada was excited by the idea that bringing Christianity to Africa was a modernizing mission, which the community wanted to spearhead. A similar understanding of the link between the colonization of Palestine and a

correct and progressive practice of Judaism can be found in several of the national religious parties that formed a crucial part of the Zionist movement as a whole and that are an essential part of the political scene of Israel today.

The CMS had a lot in common with the pre-Zionist colonization in Palestine. In a way, it preceded the Basel Mission, as did the peaceful crusaders and the Templers' Zionism. These groups also tried to create self-sufficient colonies. "Rich Africa was not properly exploited until we arrived," they declared. They began to grow cotton, which could not handle the tough climate. The Basel missionaries were more successful. They grew cacao and palms and, as result of their success, moved from self-sufficient agriculture to an industrial model. The profits were invested in the creation of new colonies and furthering the mission's influence in Ghana and Cameroon. At a certain point, the mission became the principal political force in those countries. "We preach the gospel of Jesus, Coffee, Coca, Cotton and Labor," the missionaries declared.³³

Such successes eroded the movements' original ideals and pure visions. The Basel Mission expanded in Nigeria with the help of agricultural projects and employed thousands of local workers.³⁴ Preachers who themselves used to work in the plants became supervisors and then owners of the businesses; Jewish laborers took a similar path. In both cases, it transpired that the colonization would be much more successful and efficient if collectivism were to be substituted with commerce and industry. Both movements came to bring labor from the outside that was similar in origin to the native groups but ideologically acceptable to the settlers' world. In 1827, the mission brought men and women to Ghana from the West Indies to help with proselytizing, and in the twentieth century, with the locals, they became part of the main labor force in this region of Africa. The European Jews gradually preferred the Arab Jews to the Palestinians and added them to the demographic makeup of the land.

The Favored Stepchildren of the Mother Country

Finally, the British role cemented the argument made here about the exceptional colonialism that characterized both Zionism and the Basel Mission's work. For all intents and purposes, Britain owned the lands in which the Zionists and the Basel Mission operated. As such, the two groups were not proper colonies of a mother country, Britain, but satellite movements.

These satellite movements were typified by a temporary association with colonialism, quite often in the name of noncolonialist ideologies, and this is why the satellite movement originally assisted by European colonialism eventually turned against it. The Creoles of North and South America, as they appear in Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, were such a satellite group; Anderson accords them a very formative role in the emergence of modern nationalism.³⁵

The Basel Mission's relationship with Britain was at first very tense. In their recollections, the missionaries reported a lofty attitude and a constant friction between British government officials and the settlers. In due course, mutual respect developed, but finally the mission made a connection with the West African liberation movement that struggled against the empire. However, this was not a straightforward policy. Some of the missionaries served the government of British Ghana. Some were behind significant reforms in the way British colonies were run in Nigeria, Ghana, and Cameroon. The mission's official narrative also accords the organization a decisive role in abolishing slavery in West Africa. None of these characteristics are similar to the Zionist movement, but what is similar is the framework of existing as a satellite movement relying on the British Empire. The relationship between Zionism and the British developed differently, but at the core was a similar ambivalence. Above all, it was British military might that enabled the "return" of the Jews to Palestine and of the Basel Mission to "the pure land of God."

One of the main arguments against any attempt to examine Zionism as a colonialist phenomenon is that Zionism cannot be colonialist because there is no recognized mother country or metropole. The same is true for the Basel Mission, as we have seen. Indeed, the particularism of both, namely, their satellite status compared with ordinary colonies, is in the complex way their relationship developed with Britain. The Jewish national homeland was built and survived due to British imperial support. Had London wished otherwise, the Jewish state would have been a *fait accompli* in 1917—or it would not have come into being at all. The strategy finally adopted by Britain was to endorse the slow construction of a Jewish community in Palestine, with the hope that it could be integrated into a new Anglo-Arab Middle Eastern political system. The British attitude toward the Basel Mission was quite similar.

The complex relationship was manifested in the preferential economic treatment granted by the mandatory government to the Jewish community.

It enjoyed concessions that the Palestinians could only have dreamed of. The British government encouraged the heads of the Zionist project to be self-sufficient economically and entrusted to them the natural resources of the land. In this way, the Zionist economy was segregated from the Palestinian one, as was the land and labor market, and a Jewish economic enclave was created. The British had a similar attitude to the Basel Mission economy. Both Zionism and the Basel Mission were stepchildren, but unlike in the world of “Cinderella,” they did not suffer from any discrimination; on the contrary, they were always chosen over the legitimate children of the family (namely, those who were properly the “colonized” people). The economic enclave was protected by the empire, which acted as a classical colonialist mother country. The natural resources of Palestine and West Africa were not exploited by any rival colonialist empire, and the same applied to the finance and real estate markets, which were defended against greedy profiteers from the outside. Britain was busy pursuing a protectionist policy that enabled both the Basel and Zionist economies to grow and develop at the expense of the local economy and interests.

The British allowed the Zionist movement to establish not only an economic enclave but also a separate administrative infrastructure for a future state. This is a unique feature in the conventional British colonialist praxis. Officials in London and Jerusalem did not have time to examine the Zionist settlement as part of the British colonialist world. The Zionist settlements were not made up of a typical group of natives that could easily be exploited for the empire’s sake in the name of “the white man’s burden.” The usual lofty and condescending imperial attitude did not work here. Moreover, with time the Zionist movement, very much like the Basel Mission, behaved as a rival colonialist force. But it could not be engaged in a way similar to competing European powers: there was no room for negotiation over strategic interests or territories elsewhere as part of the imperial game of *quid pro quo*. It could not be bought by money alone, as it was generally not motivated by profit considerations. However we define national motivation, it operated powerfully behind the Zionist policy vis-à-vis Britain and more fatally against the Palestinians, ending in their dispossession.

Barbara Smith offers another intriguing explanation for the British willingness to allow such economic independence during the British Mandate. Most of the Jewish immigrants who came from Eastern Europe expected a certain level of services in the new country. The British were willing to provide only the minimal level necessary to prevent the colony from becoming

an economic burden. The absence of modern services furnished by the government forced the Jewish community to supply them itself.³⁶

Whatever the reason, the economic enclave allowed the Jewish minority to establish a state while the Palestinian leadership was dormant and naive and relied on British governmental policies and false promises of protection and progress. British officials ran the Palestinian systems of life, and as happened throughout the empire, this was maintained at a very limited and low level of modernization and development. Economic thriftiness suppressed the native population in western and southern Africa, as it did in Palestine.

As with the Basel Mission, the Zionists' positive connection to Britain was eventually replaced with confrontation. But whereas only some of the missionaries joined the African liberation movement while others remained with the British administration, the national component in Zionism did not enable such a diversity. In this respect, Zionism more closely resembles white colonies in America and the Far East. The Zionist war of liberation against the empire, which lasted for three years, 1945–1948, was one that was fought also by the American, Australian, and New Zealander settlers against their mother country (and recently by Ian Smith in Rhodesia). These are all examples of European colonialism that bred local territorial nationalism.

Conclusion

The story of the Basel Mission stretches over 130 years, and it is not easy to conclude whether it was a success or a failure. It is noteworthy that a sizable part of the population in the three countries in which it operated is today Protestant. The three countries have a large number of African churches. Yet, Christianity is not the state religion, and the Protestants do not constitute a majority (although, in these countries, there is no religious majority). What is clear is that turning West Africa into a Christian haven is no longer on anyone's agenda.

In the comparison here, between Zionism and the Basel Mission, success or failure is not the point; it is rather how we evaluate the historical chapter today. If the verdict offered here is tenable, then the enterprises compared here in Palestine and in Africa, of Jews and Christians, were a far cry from the way they were portrayed and perceived by those who initiated

and maintained them. In the case of Israel, the comparisons here are a far cry from the way they are still narrated today by the established historiography. This is why the comparison was utilized—to understand Zionism as a historical phenomenon. The argument put forward here—that Zionism is a form of colonialism—is still rejected out of hand by the pro-Zionist scholarly community in the United States and of course in Israel.

But it does seem that when compared to Catholic and Protestant colonialism in Palestine and Africa, Zionism appears to be a similar colonialist venture. In this essay, the similarity was found in the way land was taken over, the way the colonialist praxis was disguised with the similar discourses of modernization and religious morality, and later on even by the adoption of an anticolonialist self-image. As such these cases were quite exceptional in the colonial scene not only because the one was nationalist and the other missionary, but because the pure colonialist examples were mainly motivated by the economic considerations of loss and profit and were wholly dependent on the metropole.

Yet the comparison did not weaken the impact and role of nationalism in Zionism. While the Palestinian historiography depicts the phenomenon of Zionism as a pure colonialist case, that national ideology diluted the pure colonialist nature of Zionism. As colonialism is not just an objective but also a pattern of behavior, it is important to ask whether it was colonialism or nationalism that turned the Zionist movement into a moment of dispossession (of the native Palestinians), a political force committed to the ethnic cleansing of Palestine. What justifications were used for the dispossession of the local people?

It seems that a pure colonialist movement would not seek the physical dispossession of the native and would remain steadfast in its self-image of bringing progress to the country. Only in its first stages did Zionism fit this pattern. Later on, its perception of the native population was drawn from the romantic nationalist world of discourses and images. It was a world in which the natural rights of one people totally negated those of another—even when the others had lived in the place for more than a millennium.

But this only happened in 1948, and until that moment in history, the tools employed by the Zionists were colonialist and would be used once more toward the Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. It is thus a nationalist movement that employed, and still does employ, colonialist tools to implement its strategy and vision.

Only a universal methodology, neutral terminology, and a comparative perspective can allow for a serious analysis of the uniqueness of the Zionist phenomenon on the spectrum between colonialism and nationalism. Both are relevant terms: none of them in the final analysis promises anything positive and promising for the original people of Palestine.

Notes

- 1 For an exposure of this trend, see Ilan Pappé, "Critique and Agenda: The Post-Zionist Scholars in Israel," *History and Memory* 7.1 (Spring/Summer 1995): 66–91.
- 2 See John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007).
- 3 Baruch Kimmerling, *Zionism and Territory: The Socio-Territorial Dimensions of Zionist Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); and Gershon Shafir, *Land, Labour, and the Origins of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, 1882–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). Amir Ben-Porat followed suit many years later in "They Did Not Sit on the Fence: Opportunity, Longing, and the Breakthrough to Palestine" (in Hebrew), *Iyunim be'Tkumat Israel* 4 (1994): 278–98.
- 4 Anita Shapira, *The Elusive Struggle: Hebrew Labor, 1929–1939* (in Hebrew) (Tel-Aviv: Am Oved, 1977); and Ran Aaronson, "Philanthropy and Settlement—YKA? And Its Activity in Eretz Israel" (in Hebrew), *Studies in the Geography of Eretz Israel* 2 (1990): 95–107.
- 5 A detailed description can be found in Alexander Scholch, *Palestine in Transformation, 1856–1882: Studies in Social, Economic, and Political Development* (Washington, DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1992), 65–70.
- 6 Victor Guérin, *Description géographique, historique, et archéologique de la Palestine*, vol. 1 (Paris: Imprimerie Impériale, 1868), 270–73.
- 7 Menachem Ussishkin, *The Ussishkin Book* (in Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Committee for the Ussishkin Publications, 1934), 105; translation by author.
- 8 Quoted in Scholch, *Palestine*, 71.
- 9 Claude Conder, "The Present Condition in Palestine," *Palestine Exploration Fund Quarterly Statement* (1879), 8.
- 10 Quoted in Scholch, *Palestine*, 71.
- 11 Laurence Oliphant, *The Land of the Gilead with Excursions in the Lebanon* (London: D. Appleton and Company, 1881), 286.
- 12 Quoted in Ben-Zion Dinur, *The Book of the Hagana*, vol. 1 (in Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense Publications, 1965), vi–v; translation by author.
- 13 Yitzhak Ben-Zvi as quoted in Yossef Grony, *The Arab Question and the Jewish Problem* (in Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1985), 84; translation by author.
- 14 Yaakov Rabinowitz, "Defending the National Labor" (in Hebrew), *Ha-Poel Hazair*, March 10, 1908; translation by author.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ussishkin, *Ussishkin Book*, 116–17.
- 17 Konrad Schick, "Studien über Colonisirung des Heiligen Landers," *Oesterreiche Monatschrift für der Orient* 7 (1881): 37.

- 18 Alex Carmel, *The Settlement of the Germans in Palestine in the Late Ottoman Period* (in Hebrew) (Haifa: Haifa University Press, 1999).
- 19 See Lamin Sanneh, *West African Christianity: The Religious Impact* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1983), 107, 111–19, 147–51; C. G. Baëte, ed., *Christianity in Tropical Africa: Studies Presented and Discussed at the Seventh International African Seminar, University of Ghana, April 1965* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968); and Noel Quinton King, *Christian and Muslim in Africa* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 47–57.
- 20 Such an explanation for the Jewish immigration can be found in Shmuel Ettinger, *The History of the People of Israel in the Modern Era* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1969), 148.
- 21 This is the conclusion of Paul Jenkins in “Towards a Definition of Pietism of Württemberg as a Missionary Movement” (paper given at the African Studies Association of the UK conference on Whites in Africa, Oxford, September 1978). See also Terence Ranger’s note on this in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 214.
- 22 See Sara Graham-Brown, *Palestinians and their Society, 1880–1946* (London: Quartet Books, 1981).
- 23 Sanneh, *West African Christianity*, 160.
- 24 David Ben-Gurion, “Towards the Future” (in Hebrew), *Hatoren* 5 (1915): 1; translation by author.
- 25 Quoted in Shabtai Teveth, *Ben-Gurion and the Palestinian Arabs: From War to Peace* (in Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Shoken, 1985), 48; translation by author.
- 26 Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2006).
- 27 Shmuel Neeman, “BILU—An Emancipatory Movement and a Settler Body” (in Hebrew), *Haziyonut* 8 (1983): 30.
- 28 The information on the model villages is gathered from Baëte, *Christianity in Tropical Africa*. See in particular there the quoted memo on page 48 of M.M.S. (Mission Secretary) to Freeman from July 10, 1856.
- 29 Nahum Gross, “Economic Enterprise in the Period of the Mandate and the State” (in Hebrew), *Yahadut Zemanenu* 6 (1990): 293–304.
- 30 Shafir, *Land, Labour*; and Ernest Gelner, *Nationals and Nationalism* (in Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Open University Publications, 1994), 140–41.
- 31 Quoted in Sanneh, *West African Christianity*, 159.
- 32 See Yossef Salmon, “Tradition and Modernity in the Early Zionist Religious Thought” (in Hebrew), in *Zionist Ideology and Policy*, ed. Yehoshua Ben Zion (Jerusalem: Shazar Center, 1978), 10, 26–27.
- 33 Quoted in Sanneh, *West African Christianity*, 160.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991), 47–66.
- 36 Barbara J. Smith, *The Roots of Separatism in Palestine: British Economic Policy, 1920–1929* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1993), 135–59.