

The last colonizer

by [Bert de Vries](#) in the [August 15, 2001](#) issue

Zionism and the State of Israel: A Moral Inquiry. By Michael Prior: Routledge, 291 pp., \$75.00.

Recently I witnessed an Israeli settler march at the square inside Jerusalem's Jaffa Gate. The settlers had traveled from towns with biblical names like Efrat (the field where Rachel was buried), newly built on land confiscated from Palestinian villagers. Israeli soldiers with machine guns stood between the settlers, some of whom were dancing jubilantly, and sullen-faced Palestinian shopkeepers. A tourist taking this scene at face value might have imagined he was seeing Zion being restored to God's chosen, protected by soldiers from Arab terrorists.

After reading Michael Prior's book, however, one would perceive the scene quite differently. One would see recently arrived colonists celebrating their successful settlement on stolen land, protected by imperial soldiers holding the dispossessed natives at bay. And one would understand how such a thing could still be happening long after the abolition of colonialism elsewhere.

Prior, who teaches at St. Mary's College of the University of Surrey, began his career with a typically positive view of Israel. He delighted in Israel's 1967 victory over its Arab neighbors, which he saw as the outcome of "a classic David versus Goliath conflict, with diminutive, innocent Israel repulsing its rapacious Arab predators." However, during his visits to Israel for postgraduate study, he witnessed the oppressive realities of the Israeli occupation and the aggressive confiscation of land for settlements. This triggered his long inquiry into the Zionist-Israeli occupation of Palestine.

Prior's thesis is that the Jewish occupation and settlement of Palestine is the kind of 19th-century colonial venture that has everywhere else become obsolete. In an earlier work, *The Bible and Colonialism* (1997), he compared the occupation of Palestine to the Spanish-Portuguese and Dutch colonizations of Latin America and South Africa. For all three a major normative paradigm for the subjugation of indigenous peoples was the biblical tradition of the conquest and occupation of

Canaan.

As a moral inquiry, the book's starting point is the universal principles of human justice and equality. Zionists may not justly make claims that violate the rights of another people, the Palestinians. Seen this way, Prior's argument that the various phases of the occupation of Palestine and the development of the state of Israel have been a form of colonialism are convincing.

The ideology of Theodor Herzl, Zionism's founder, and its implementation in the early migration of Jews to Palestine was clearly colonial. But so is the Zionist development of the state of Israel from the time of the British Mandate to the present. To make way for Israel, most Palestinians were expelled from the land and have languished in refugee camps or a diaspora for more than 50 years. Their towns and villages were destroyed and redeveloped as settlements for Jewish immigrants, and Israel's precondition for negotiating a peace treaty is that Palestinian refugees be denied the right to return.

Those Palestinians who remained in Israel have been and continue to be treated as second-class citizens. Those in the "territories" have survived 34 years of military occupation as "hewers of wood and haulers of water." Many have been held at gunpoint while their houses have been bulldozed and their farms confiscated. The function of the Israeli army has shifted more and more from defense to the protection of the settlers, the brutal enclosure of Palestinian areas and the killing of targeted individuals and random bystanders.

Prior's portrayal of the displacement and subjugation of the Palestinians as a long process of ethnic cleansing has been made possible by the recent revisionist historical research of Israeli scholars like Benny Morris. These scholars have shown that the Nakba, the catastrophe that overcame the Palestinians in 1948, was a deliberate expulsion planned by the Zionist leaders, followed by the equally deliberate destruction of most of the abandoned Palestinian villages. (A careful detailing of that ethnic cleansing was done by Israeli demographer Meiron Benvenisti in *Sacred Landscape*.) All succeeding Zionist-Israeli leaders have continued this process. Their preoccupation with the success of the exclusively Jewish state has imbued these leaders, though not all Israelis, with a merciless blindness to the suffering they inflict on Palestinians.

Prior asserts that Zionists have gotten away with all this through "one of the most successful disinformation campaigns of modern times," which has replaced negative history with positive myths. These include the deliberate falsification of the events of 1948, and are evident today in the kind of double-speak in which a term like "Middle East violence" includes Palestinian stone throwing, but excludes the Israeli shooting of unarmed civilians. Such distortions have had an exceptionally uncritical reception in the West, especially in America. One cause is the long-lasting remorse for the Holocaust, a remorse at once understandable, since the Holocaust happened in the West, but also puzzling, since Nazis, not Americans, inflicted it. The need to make amends to the Holocaust survivors has often blinded us to the suffering of the Palestinians.

Prior's chapter on the linking of Zionism to the Bible is the most original of the book. Both secular and religious Zionists and a significant number of Christians have made this link. Adherents use the ancient promised-land ideology and the stories of conquest and destruction to justify the Israeli occupation of Palestine. This is evident in the extremist literalism of many Jewish settlers and fundamentalist Christians, but it is also a major factor in mainstream Judaism and Christianity. Mainstream Jewish and Christian theologians have argued against such literalism only by insisting on a theology of spiritual redemption; they have not provided any substantial arguments based on the critical interpretation of the biblical text itself. Correcting this omission is one of Prior's main purposes.

Prior argues that theological and academic research on biblical antiquity has failed to include moral inquiry rooted in universal principles of justice, both by taking the biblical-conquest stories at face value and by ignoring their misuse as justification for modern Zionist behavior. My own experience with academic societies for east Mediterranean archaeology testifies to this, and I agree that the guise of scholarly objectivity actually abets the Zionist enterprise.

Prior also argues that mainstream textual and archaeological studies have taken the classic "land" texts as historical, without seriously applying the critical tools scholars use on nonbiblical texts. Particularly, they have ignored the literary character of those texts and have not given the substantial archaeological evidence contradicting their historicity its due. Taken seriously, these would make clear that the "land" texts from Genesis to Judges testify to the historical situation and ideology of their composers, who interpreted the past through their own historical experiences--in the eighth-century Assyrian and later empires--to create their own founding ideology.

Thus, the immorality of such notions as the institution of *herem*--the war convention that requires the total extermination of enemies and their property--is not attributable to either the behavior of early Israelites or divine command, but to the ideology and history of those later writers themselves.

Basing the modern right to return and the justification of Zionist militarism on those texts is theologically and ideologically spurious.

Prior does not intend to detract from the religious significance of the biblical text. Rather, he considers his work part of a serious movement to rehabilitate that text as a credible source for theology and liturgy. His work belongs to a spate of new scholarship which challenges traditional approaches to the Bible, especially the Orientalist school of W. F. Albright (a combining of traditional historicity and culture evolution), through a radical rereading of the Bible in the light of the reconstructed history of the ancient Near East emerging from the contextual evidence.

These works are especially valuable because our traditional interpretations have been so instrumental in the rationalization of bloodshed and oppression. The revisionism of this group, including Thomas L. Thompson and Keith W. Whitelam, has triggered lively debates and is having a major impact on both Old Testament and Palestinian-Israeli studies. On the implications of archaeology for the Bible, I. Finkelstein and N. A. Silberman's *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts* is especially interesting.

Zionism has serious opponents in Israel (e.g., Uri Avneri and Israel Shahak), in world Judaism (e.g., Michael Lerner, editor of *Tikkun*) and in Christianity. Of the many voices seeking to be heard, that of the indigenous Palestinian Christians is worth highlighting.

In spite of the continued Western sympathy for Zionism, it has serious opponents in Israel and in world Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The objections of Palestinian Christians and Muslims are especially poignant, as the denial of their rights in the name of the Zionist's god is at heart a denial of access to the promises of God. Prior's book makes this clear.