



Classical Texts

City of Stone: the Hidden History of Jerusalem,

by Meron Benvenisti

Reviewed by Husam Mohammad

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"What is Jerusalem?" "Whose is Jerusalem?" and "What is the future of Jerusalem?" These and many other timely questions are addressed by Meron Benvenisti's compelling study on Jerusalem. Benvenisti, a former deputy mayor of Jerusalem and a well-known authority on the city's history and geography, has written numerous books on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and on Jerusalem, including *Intimate Enemies: Jews and Arabs in a Shared Land* (1995) and *Jerusalem, the Torn City* (1977). *City of Stone* deals with the city's old and modern history, its religious and urban sights, geographical and demographic changes and the claims and

counterclaims of its communities. It consists of eight chapters, each focused on a topic of central importance to the city: history, boundaries, religion, systems of municipal government, city planning, demography, peace proposals, and cemeteries.

Chapter one surveys the city's history, from its origins to the present, with particular focus on inter-communal conflicts between Arabs and Jews from the British Mandate period (1922-47) through the period after the 1967 war, when the whole of Jerusalem became subject to Israel's policy of annexation and settlement, or what Israel chose to call "unification" (p. 35, 64).

A central theme of the chapter is that there is no single "true" version of the city's history, but rather distinct Arab and Jewish ones, each weaving highly selective narratives according to nationalist priorities. To illustrate this process of historical myth making, he explores the 1996 Jewish celebration of the "3000 year" anniversary of "Jerusalem, the City of David." Benvenisti shows how the version of history promulgated at this celebration was that of the "victors and not the vanquished," deleting the Arab connections with the city from its chronological charts. At the same time, Benvenisti suggests that if the situation were reversed in the city, Arabs would likely be celebrating a 5000 years' anniversary of Jerusalem, the city of the "Jebusites," in which Jewish connections would also be deleted (p. 49).

Chapter 2 examines the politics of map-making and the drawing of boundaries. After it annexed the city in 1967, Israel arbitrarily redrew Jerusalem's boundaries to meet the criterion of "maximum territory, minimum Arab population." Since 1967

Arabs have tried to preserve the city's old identity and character, while Jews have sought to re-fashion the city according to their national goals, establishing within it new "physical facts" for the purpose of maintaining sovereignty.

Religion is at the heart of the struggle over the city. Chapter 3 traces the changing character of the conflict over the holy places, showing how since the nineteenth-century religious conflict has intensified as various national groups have "welded nationalistic designs to religious symbols, to an extent that blurred the distinctions between them" (p. 77).

How do you govern such a divided city? That is the question Benvenisti turns to in chapter 4, which surveys the various systems of municipal government from the Ottoman period to the present by which Jerusalem's rulers have sought to contain the conflicts threatening to tear the city apart.

Exacerbating this conflict has been the systematic effort to promote a Jewish presence in the city at the expense of the Arab population. Chapter 5 treats the way the supposedly neutral science of urban planning has been twisted into an ideology for furthering the judaization of the city's population.

Chapter six focuses on demography, providing a concise history of population changes in the city from the Ottoman period to the present, looking in particular at Israeli attempts at demographic engineering in East Jerusalem since 1967. The chapter also analyzes class and ethnic divisions, finding that they largely overlap. Benvenisti observes that each of Jerusalem's Arab and Jewish communities has been able to establish its own distinct

"normal" society with few links to the other. The Arab and Jewish communities have also learned to develop new mechanisms for survival within the framework of "tribal maps" drawn in the minds of community members wandering within the city's boundaries. (p. 198). With regard to the "wish for separation" marking relationships among the city's communities, Benvenisti makes interesting comparisons between the existing situations in Jerusalem and Belfast. He argues that Jerusalem is an even more divided city because its two communities interact far less frequently and because with respect to lifestyle and culture the gap between Arabs and Jews is much greater than that between Catholics and Protestants in Belfast (p. 197).

In chapter seven, Benvenisti reviews various recent plans for resolving the Jerusalem question. He notes that as a result of the Intifada mutual fear and hostility between Arabs and Jews in the city has grown. This fear, he suggests, has produced a desire for separation that has been a "motivating force behind the Israeli-Palestinian peace process" (p.199). He charts the emergence on the ground of a de facto separation between the two communities and suggests that a realistic and practical approach to peace in the city will accept this already existing separation as the basis for a future peace involving divided sovereignty over the city.

The last chapter of the book is devoted to reflections occasioned by visits to various Jewish, Christian and Muslim cemeteries in Jerusalem. Through re-telling some of the poignant stories memorialized on their tombstones, Benvenisti conveys the depth

of the conflicts and tragedies that have shaped relations between Jerusalem's ethnic and religious communities (p. 247).

Unifying the book is a central concern with how various groups have sought to lay claim to and maintain a hold over the city through both ideological constructions and through the alteration of facts on the ground. Benvenisti has the courage to make plain throughout that Israel's nationalist designs on the city have everything to do with maintaining and legitimizing Jewish-Israeli control over the city and nothing to do with their professed aims of "unifying the city" or "equalizing services" for all its inhabitants.

The book's structure as a series of essayistic reflections on closely related topics has drawbacks and advantages. Not being a scholarly monograph, the book does not offer original research for specialists in the field. Moreover, it lacks any scholarly footnotes or bibliography, something researchers will find annoying, especially in a book that draws on and engages with so much of the existing scholarly literature. Finally, material in one chapter often overlaps with material in another, making the book repetitive at times. Nevertheless, in covering so many important topics in a colorful style rich with anecdotes, *City of Stone* provides a vivid introduction to the conflict over the city for the general reader. The book should also be of value to those interested in studying ethnic, national and inter-communal conflicts, as well as for courses on the history and politics of the Palestinian-Israeli dispute.

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