

Why Do Palestinians Burn Jewish Holy Sites?

The Fraught History of Joseph's Tomb

Alex Shams

On 16 October 2015, a large crowd of Palestinians near the northern West Bank city of Nablus surrounded the religious site of Joseph's Tomb and forced their way past Palestinian security guards at the main gate. Once inside, they proceeded to set the shrine alight.¹ Although the building was somewhat damaged, for the most part the shrine – a simple white structure furnished with only a small tomb – escaped unscathed.

The attack on the shrine elicited widespread outrage from commentators in the Israeli press, who condemned the attack on what many Israelis consider a Jewish shrine.² Some pointed to the fact that the shrine was also targeted in the same way by Palestinian protesters in 2000, when the Israeli military first pulled out of the site and turned it over to Palestinian authorities. For Israelis, the attack seemed to indicate yet again that Palestinian violence is motivated by anti-Jewish hatred. Why would Palestinians attack a Jewish religious shrine if not because they hate Jews?

The reality, however, is far different than the Israeli narrative would seem to suggest. Built by Palestinians and located in the heart of a densely-populated Palestinian neighborhood, the history of Joseph's Tomb belies Israeli claims about its identity as a "Jewish holy site."³ The identity of Joseph's Tomb – and the claim that it is a "Jewish" shrine – is instead caught up in the wider history of the appropriation of Palestinian religious sites in the Zionist narrative.

It is one of many shrines across historic Palestine – now split into Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza – that has been re-invented as exclusively Jewish, despite a long history of shared worship among Jews, Christians, Muslims, and Samaritans that

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goes back centuries. And the reason it has been attacked has almost nothing to do with religion, and much to do with how the Israeli military and settlement movements have used religion as a way to expand their control over Palestinian land and holy places.

Shaykh Yusuf

Joseph's Tomb has been a site of pilgrimage for centuries, one of hundreds of such tombs across Palestine (and the region) that have spiritual significance for locals. Until 1967, it was commonly visited by local Muslims, Christians, Jews, and Samaritans, and it is one of a host of minor holy sites (*maqam* in Arabic) scattered around Nablus and its environs. Some say the site hosted a shrine closely associated with Samaritans (a small ancient Jewish sect that lives in Nablus and Holon) before the spread of Islam and Christianity in the area. This is a likely guess given that religious sites are often built atop other religious sites. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the Church of the Nativity, and many other major Christian holy sites are thought to have been built atop former Roman temples, for example, in keeping with common practices in many parts of the world – and Palestine is no exception – that involve creation of religious sites to one's own god atop the sites of the gods of vanquished religions. Many holy sites changed their names and features over time as they became important to new religious traditions, and the addition of adherents from different faiths was seen as complementing the importance of the shrine, not taking away from it.⁴ Thus a site like Joseph's Tomb, which was previously holy to Samaritans, also became holy to local Muslims, Christians, and Jews.

One of the few things that almost everyone agrees on (including the Jewish Virtual Library) is that Joseph's Tomb probably has nothing to do with the biblical Joseph.⁵ The site of the current tomb is mentioned nowhere in the Bible (only a note that it is near Nablus and not much more) and the existence of a tomb in the area is not accounted for until centuries after Christ. Throughout the centuries some visitors have suggested the biblical Joseph's grave is in the area based on speculation, but no fixed claim or consensus regarding the tomb has ever existed. Various historians and travelers over the centuries mentioned possible locations for Joseph's Tomb in the area of Nablus, while others asserted it was more likely closer to Hebron. It is unclear if the historical mentions of Joseph's Tomb actually map on to the site today called Joseph's Tomb. This is a quite common situation; throughout the region, one finds multiple sites dedicated to a single holy figure. Part of the confusion is due to the fact that many of the holy tombs and sites are actually graves of local holy figures, whether Sufi shaykhs, saints, or people whose identities have been forgotten. Their sacredness came not from a direct connection to a biblical figure but from locals' perceptions of holiness embedded in the geography itself. This was often through the intercession of a local saint buried there, though sometimes all that was needed was a place with a scenic panorama and a geographical feature like a cave, spring or boulder which locals would visit to meditate and make vows. The local Palestinian belief today is that the tomb belongs to Shaykh



Figure 1. Joseph's Tomb. Photo by author, November 2015.

Yusuf (“Joseph”) Dwaykat, a Sufi holy man who died in the eighteenth century and was reportedly buried there.

In the 1800s, European travelers and scholars began journeying to the “Holy Land” to map the Bible onto the existing Palestinian landscape. Imagining a direct connection between the places they saw and the biblical stories of two thousand years ago, they often ignored local knowledge and attempted to translate pre-existing names into the tales of biblical legends. Despite the fact that there is little historical evidence that the biblical figure Joseph ever even existed, a tomb outside Nablus became directly linked to him in the European orientalist imagination.

The modern claim that Joseph's Tomb is directly related to the biblical Joseph appears to have emerged as a result of claims by William Cooke Taylor in the 1830s. Cooke was an Irish journalist traveling in the area motivated by interest in biblical history but with no expertise in the field. Although in his writings he claims the site was believed to be the tomb of the patriarch and that all the religions agreed as much, no other geographers who ventured into the area in the decades that followed reported anything of the sort. And it is unclear from his writings what local Palestinians, the people who were actually living in and around the shrine and worshipping there, believed about the shrine. British geographers subsequently took up Taylor's claim, however, and over the years it was forgotten that it had been more or less made up based on conjecture.

But the claims of biblical archaeologists had a strong role in how the Zionist movement would come to understand and conceive of the landscape.⁶ As European Jews migrated to Palestine in the first half of the twentieth century, they drew upon biblical archeology's claims. They adopted archeologists' claims that Palestinian holy sites were directly linked to ancient biblical figures. In many cases, they focused on occupying those sites in order to legitimize the colonial endeavor by giving it a sense of deeper history. In many cases, this would mean evicting the Palestinians who actually frequented these holy sites.

When Israel occupied the West Bank in 1967, religious Zionists began flocking to Joseph's Tomb. The tomb, which was previously open to pilgrims of all faiths, began to fall under exclusively Jewish control. As growing numbers of armed Jewish settlers were escorted to the tomb under military escort, the area became increasingly viewed with apprehension by Palestinians living around the site. In 1975, the Israeli military banned Palestinians – that is, the Samaritans, Muslims, and Christians living around the site – from visiting, a ban that has remained in place until this day. When I visited in summer 2015, the tomb was shut closed, but a sympathetic guard allowed me and a friend to look around, under his close watch.

Unsurprisingly, the ban has ignited intense anger over the years. This is true particularly given that frequent visits by Jewish settlers to the shrine are accompanied by hundreds of Israeli soldiers, who enter the area and run atop the rooftops of local Palestinians to “secure” the tomb. As a result, Joseph's Tomb has increasingly become associated with the Israeli military and settlement movement in the eyes of Palestinians. Its presence has become an excuse for frequent military incursions that provoke clashes and lead to arrests and many injuries in the neighborhood.⁷

Some fear that Israelis will attempt to take over the shrine to build an Israeli settlement around it. This fear is not unfounded, given the fact that Israeli settlers have done exactly that all across the West Bank in places they believe are connected in some way to Jewish biblical history. The notoriously violent Jewish settlements in Hebron, for example, were built there due to the location of the Tomb of the Patriarchs in that southern West Bank town. Following the initial years of settlement, settlers even managed to convince Israeli authorities to physically divide the shrine – which is holy to local Palestinians – and turn the whole area into a heavily-militarized complex. Other shrines have become excuses for the Israeli military to build army bases inside Palestinian towns, like Rachel's Tomb in Bethlehem – which is surrounded by twenty-foot high concrete walls on three sides to block Palestinian access. The village of Nabi Samwel near Jerusalem, meanwhile, was demolished in its entirety to provide Jewish settlers access to the tomb at its heart.

At Joseph's Tomb, the nearby hilltop Israeli settlements of Bracha and Itamar were built in this way. Jewish settlers at both sites used biblical references to justify their theft of the land from local Palestinian villages. They are two of the most violent Israeli settlements in the northern West Bank, with nearby Palestinian communities facing frequent and recurring attacks, including the destruction of olive groves (some of which, ironically, actually date back to biblical times). Until 2000, a Jewish yeshiva built by Israeli settlers

even existed at Joseph's Tomb, a fact remembered well by Palestinian locals who once had to contend with constant Israeli military presence around their homes.

The Israeli military only relinquished control over the site to the Palestinian Authority in 2000, after years of resistance by local Palestinians. As soon as the soldiers left, locals overran the tomb and set it ablaze. After decades of being used as a base for Israeli settlers and the military, it is no wonder that Palestinians saw Joseph's Tomb as a symbol of Israeli control and not merely as a religious shrine. The history of the Israeli military's use of Joseph's Tomb to base itself in the heart of a Palestinian neighborhood in an area ostensibly under Palestinian Authority has inextricably tied the site to the Israeli occupation as a whole.

As a result of the appropriation of the tomb by the Zionist right and its conversion into an exclusive Jewish holy site, the long history of religious coexistence and the multiple histories that once flourished at the tomb have been erased from the public imagination. After decades of having buildings identified as Jewish religious sites used as inroads to create permanent Israeli military bases, it is no wonder that some Palestinians have attacked some of these sites. Israel's occupation has indelibly tied places like Joseph's Tomb to their rule over Palestinians, in the process fueling a shift in how the conflict is imagined: from being a political struggle for Palestinian self-determination in the face of a settler-colonial state to an all-out religious war. In the wake of the deaths of dozens of Palestinians at the hands of Israeli forces over the course of October 2015 and the shooting injuries of thousands more, it is not surprising the tomb became a target of Palestinian anger. Israeli authorities have no one but themselves to blame for the destruction in Nablus in 2015, as well as repeated clashes at the site since then.

The History of Shrines in Palestine

For Palestinians, the story of Joseph's Tomb is only one chapter in the longer story of the destruction of Palestine and the mapping of Israel atop it. Prior to the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, shrines across Palestine were open to all, and it was not uncommon to find more than one of the five main religious groups of the land – Muslims, Christians, Jews, Druze, and Samaritans – venerating the same site. In some cases, particularly around al-Aqsa Mosque/Temple Mount, this shared veneration had to do with the fact that religious traditions overlapped geographically.

But the vast majority of the hundreds of shrines across Palestine are small domed buildings dedicated to local saints and figures, especially Sufi holy men and ascetics, and for the most part were not connected to events that occurred in holy texts.⁸ In a phenomenon common around the world, Palestinians built tombs for prominent spiritual figures and over time these became favorite sites of worship for all who lived in the nearby areas, of whatever religion.

As James Grehan notes, this was part of a religious culture shared among locals of many different faiths across the region.⁹ While contemporary scholars have often focused on text in order to understand religion in the past, Grehan notes that this



Figure 2. Joseph's Tomb. Photo by author, November 2015.

creates a distorted view of how religion was lived in societies like Palestine, where in the nineteenth century less than ten percent of the population was literate. He argues that understanding popular religious culture necessarily entails a focus on popular practices, and the hundreds of tombs – the vast majority of which are graves to local saints or holy figures – were at the heart of those practices shared by Palestinians of all religious affiliations.

Some of the most prominent of these shrines are located in the mountains of the central West Bank near Dayr Ghassana – home to the so-called Sufi Trail¹⁰ – but in almost every village in Palestine such shrines can be found. In addition to local worship, these shrines attracted pilgrims from far and wide, and many had festival days associated with them (and some still do). One of the largest of these festivals was Nabi Ruben,¹¹ located just over a dozen kilometers south of Jaffa, which attracted thousands from across the region every year until 1948.

For Palestinian villagers, these shrines were a focal point of communal life, a phenomenon Salim Tamari richly describes in his book *Mountain against the Sea*.¹² In general, these shrines provided a pleasant space for villagers to relax in an era before the concept of leisure was widespread, and the festivals associated with them allowed members of a largely agrarian society accustomed to strenuous farm work an extended chance to let loose. Nabi Ruben's festival, which attracted upwards of thirty

thousand people throughout the 1930s and even more in the 1940s, was famous for its pleasure tents by the sea, where hashish, drinks, and dancing were on offer in addition to fortune-telling, bathing, and Sufi meditation. Women in particular were attracted to the shrines, and many of them – including Nabi Ruben, Rachel’s Tomb, and the Milk Grotto – were visited for their legendary power to increase fertility.

After 1948, when Zionist militias forcibly expelled 750,000 Palestinians from what became Israel, most of these shrines were destroyed and the festivals came to an end. Given the fact that the vast majority of Palestinians were displaced from their native land, spiritual practices rooted in specific sites and places could not continue post-Nakba, except in memory. Over time, even the majority of those sites where Palestinians still lived, especially in the West Bank, fell out of use.¹³ In line with global trends toward the literal reading of religious scripture – which in the Islamic context included the adoption of Salafi critiques of shrine worship by mainstream Sunni Muslims – many Palestinians stopped frequenting shrines devoted to specific local individuals that were not mentioned in religious texts.¹⁴ Some shrines – like al-Khadr near Bethlehem or Nabi Musa in Jericho – remained sites of pilgrimage but the vast majority fell out of use over time.

The Politicization of Palestinian Religious Sites

As the shrines became underused by Palestinians, however, religious Zionists in Israel began taking a renewed interest in them. For them, the goal of Israel was to redeem the land for the Jewish people, and a major part of the Zionist project necessarily involved finding the exact places where the Hebrews of the Bible lived. The problem was, however, that the Bible is not a map nor a history textbook, and as a result it was quite difficult to pinpoint the exact locations of much of what was mentioned therein.

As Nadia Abu El-Haj¹⁵ and Basem Ra’ad¹⁶ have highlighted, religious Zionists often relied upon texts drawn up under the British in the nineteenth century, when geographers carried out cartographic expeditions to “map” the Bible atop modern Palestine. These maps were less than precise, however, and involved a lot of guessing using the names of Palestinian villages and attempts to figure out if the Arabic words might be derived from Aramaic or Hebrew. The result was a hodgepodge of falsehoods that was, over time, accepted as truth.

Particularly after 1967, when Israel occupied the West Bank and large areas mentioned in the Old Testament fell under Israeli occupation (the coast has comparatively little Hebrew history), religious Zionists revived the British “Holy Land” maps to go on their own treasure hunts for Jewish remains.¹⁷ In many places, tombs that were historically shared by locals of different faiths were appropriated by the religious Zionist movement, which stressed their Jewish character for political purposes in order to convince the government to assert control. Today, this amalgam of guesses made by British travelers is repeated as truth in the Israeli media as well as the international media, which generally takes the Israeli narrative as fact. Even something as basic and commonly-used as Wikipedia pages for these sites are based on the guesses of British



Figure 3. The Palestinian neighborhood immediately beside the Joseph's Tomb compound. This street leads away from Joseph's Tomb toward Mount Gerizim, the most sacred site for the Samaritan community of Palestine. Photo by author, November 2015.

travelers in the nineteenth century.

Palestinian narratives, meanwhile, are added as footnotes, if they are presented at all. Joseph's Tomb, which should be an everlasting reminder of the richly-varied history of human religious, social, and cultural practice and the diversity of beliefs that can coexist in one humble little building, is today instead a flashpoint in a conflict that Israeli authorities are increasingly trying to frame as a religious struggle.

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