

PALESTINE – FROM HEBREW BIBLE TO THE PRESENT

Richard Seaford, professor of Ancient Greek at Exeter University, joined Faringdon Peace Group in May with a stimulating and controversial talk about history and myth in the Holy Land and how it has shaped more recent events in the area. The talk preceded the latest escalation of violence in Israel/Palestine. As an activist and supporter of Palestinian rights, he wondered how it was possible that we were complicit in a military superpower (Israel) displacing defenceless people (Palestinians) in defiance of international law. The factors he thought were at play were the historical suffering of the Jews culminating in the Holocaust, the media, the slurs of anti-semitism against those who criticise Israel and finally the story of the Jewish people being expelled from their homeland in 79 AD and returning to it in the 20th century. It was this final factor which his talk centred on.

Richard is currently engaged in a project comparing the two surviving ancient cultures from the western asian/mediterranean area - Ancient Greek and Judaism. He strongly believes that the very distant past really matters to us today and claims that for too long those with a vested interest have used historical and archaeological investigations merely to confirm their existing theories and beliefs and justify their actions in the present day. He believes academics and historians must stand back and see all sides of the story, and that applies to Israel/Palestine as much as any other issue.

Richard talked about myths, which are often important and meaningful and may have some element of truth or memory in them but are not historical facts. Myths allow us to reshape the past depending on our interests in the present and are valuable in what they tell us about the society and culture of the ancient past. Homer's description of the Trojan wars, for example, was long believed to be historically accurate but not any more. Similarly, though many still believe in the literal truth of the Hebrew bible, Richard claimed that historical and archaeological findings now show that many of the characters and events within it, though meaningful, are not based on historical reality.

Richard concentrated on two myths, as he called them, which have shaped the recent history of Palestine/Israel. These are firstly, that Jews were the only people living in the land God gave them and secondly, that all Jews were expelled from their homeland in the exodus of 79 AD. These 'myths' justify the establishment of Israel as a Jewish homeland in the 20th century. He believes the evidence points to wide racial and cultural diversity in historical Israel with many different ethnicities and nationalities living alongside Jews. All were subject to similar levels of military violence. While some Jews may have been killed or expelled in the first century AD, many stayed in the country as is evidenced by Jewish temples of the 2nd, 3rd and 4th century.

Another myth Richard described was that of kinship or race, the idea that all share a common ancestor. While there is inevitably some biological continuity, there were more Jews living around the Mediterranean than inside historical Israel and many had converted to Judaism rather than been born into it. Judaism is a culture, not a race, therefore not all Jews can claim descentance from people who were possessors of the land of Palestine. It could even be that many Palestinian Arabs are descended from Jews who converted to Islam in the Arab invasion of 638AD.

History is always messier than we would like it to be, Richard admitted, and he did not claim to have all the answers, but as these two myths, as he sees them, are central in maintaining the oppression of Palestinians and furthering Zionist ideals, he thought they ought to at least be under discussion. He hoped his talk would provoke open and honest debate on the issues.

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