

Do Jews Exist?

A review of Shlomo Sand, *The Invention of the Jewish People* (London, New York: Verso, 2009)

“All prophetic truth revolves around the Jews.” - Jack van Impe and Roger F. Campbell

The dominant view among American evangelicals, perhaps even world-wide, is dispensationalism. This theology sees God’s program in history as centered on the Jews; the Christian church they call a “mystery parenthesis” in God’s program, something not foreseen in Old Testament times, and introduced as a temporary measure when the Jews in Jesus’ time refused his offer of the Kingdom. But God, they say, will revert to his original program centered on the Jews, the descendants of Abraham “according to the flesh”, and soon. The beginning of this reversion to the Jewish centered program is evident in the return of the Jews to their ancient homeland, from which the Romans expelled them, and the establishment of the state of Israel. God, says dispensationalism, will remove the Christians from the earth, and then the battle of Satan and his forces against God will take the form of an attack on the Jews, at the end of which they will at last accept Jesus as their Messiah, reversing what they had done 2000 years ago. Following this will be the millennium where the Jews (including the resurrected dead) along Jesus will rule over the world. The gentile Christians will be confined to a huge cube that hovers over the earth, but which for a thousand years will not be allowed to touch down on the surface. I recall my seminary class in eschatology, when some student asked “Will we take part in the millennium?”, and the instructor, Paul Feinberg, who fancied himself to be some sort of Jew, replied, “You won’t, but I will!”

But suppose that the Jews were not expelled by the Romans. Suppose that they already converted to Christianity before the Roman empire ended. Suppose the people who went to Israel in the 20th century were not Jews, descendants of Abraham, but the descendants of converts, brought into Judaism in ancient times by intense Jewish efforts at proselytism. That is what Shlomo Sand sets out to establish in his book. In effect dispensationalism turns out to be the incorporation into Christianity of a Zionist mythology.

Although Sand claimed only to be collecting well-known historical information, following the book’s publication in Israel, under the title *When and How Was the Jewish People Invented?* in 2008, there was a big stir and a denunciation of the book by the Zionist establishment, whose ideology requires the idea that they are the true owners of Palestine because they are the original owners returning. It is also opposed by rabbinic Judaism, as in the Middle Ages they made a virtue of necessity by turning from a proselytizing religion to one that forbade it (the practice having become illegal and severely punished from the late Roman Empire onward) and strongly discouraged conversion. They then adjusted their concept of what it was to be a Jew to match.

Sand’s first chapter is dedicated to the sociology of the idea of nationhood and ideologies of nationalism. He covers the various theories and conflicting definitions that have been proposed, with a view to showing how problematic the concept is. His approach is historical, showing how these

concepts were refined or overturned by successive theorists. As many of the prospective readers of the book were people raised in the Zionist national narrative, and without historical or sociological sophistication, it makes sense to undermine any existing naivete on these matters, which would likely lead to dogmatic attitudes. Additionally, the book is the first of a proposed series, to be followed by *The Invention of the Land of Israel*, and one challenging the idea of the secular Jew, which perhaps is fulfilled by his book *How I Stopped Being a Jew*. (As one reviewer summarized it: “Shlomo Sand to secular Jews: I’m not Jewish and neither are you.”) Thus this review of theories of nationhood serves to ground a broader project. Many readers may skip it as too tedious.

Next comes a history of the writing of Jewish histories, in a chapter Sand titles “Mythistory”. He begins with Josephus, whose books *The Jewish War* and *Antiquities of the Jews* have no parallel. He notes that “Between Flavius Josephus and the modern era there were no attempts by Jewish authors to write a general history of their past.” (p. 65) Josephus took the *Roman Antiquities* of Dionysus of Halicarnassus as his model for such a work. But after this, Sand says, “Neither Christianity’s highly developed tradition of chronicles nor Islamic historical literature appealed to rabbinical Judaism, which, with rare exceptions, refused to examine either its near or distant past.” (p. 66) As Judaism is often called the first historical religion, which passed an historical consciousness on to the western world, this situation is strikingly strange. Yet this idea of an historical consciousness is based on the Biblical writings.

The Bible, though, had changed status among the Jews.

The centuries-old Jewish communities never thought of the Old Testament as an independent work that could be read without the interpretation and mediation of the “oral Torah” (the Mishnah and Talmud). It had become, mainly among the Jews of Eastern Europe, a marginal book that could be understood only through the Halakhah (religious law) and of course its authorized commentators. The Mishnah and Talmud were the Jewish texts in regular use; passages from the Torah (the Pentateuch) were introduced, without any narrative continuity, in the form of a weekly section read aloud in the synagogues. The Old Testament as a whole remained the leading work for the Karaites in the distant past and for the Protestants in modern times. For most Jews through the centuries, the Bible was holy scripture and thus not really accessible to the mind, just as the Holy Land was barely present in the religious imagination as an actual place on earth. (pp. 74-75)

This equation, so strange to Protestants, that “the Bible was holy scripture and thus not really accessible to the mind”, seems natural to Sand, and he does not further explain it.

The first modern history of the Jews, according to Sand, was by the Huguenot Jacques Basnage, who was interested in the Jews as “the chosen victims of the corrupt papacy.” (p. 67) Basnage’s work served as a starting point for a history, this time written by a Jew, by Markus Jost about a hundred years later, *A History of the Israelites from the Time of the Maccabees to Our Time*, (1820). “This work would surprise today’s readers, because this first modern attempt to tell the complete history of the Jews, written by a historian who saw himself as a Jew, skipped over the biblical period.” (p. 67) We need not pick through the successive Jewish histories that Sand discusses at length, but only note his major point

that “right from the start, there was a close connection between the perception of the Old Testament as a reliable historical source and the attempt to define modern Jewish identity in prenationalist or nationalist terms. The more nationalistic the author, the more he treats the Bible as history—as the birth certificate attesting to the common origin of the ‘people’.” (p. 71)

By the end of the nineteenth century the Old Testament had “become the book of the Jewish national revival” (p. 87) giving rise to a Zionist “narrative strategy ... namely, that the Bible is indeed full of imaginary tales, but its historical core is trustworthy. Why? Because the legendary quality was added by later popular tradition and literary modification, which adapted the living “people’s memory”, an “authentic, indisputable testimony to the actual experiences of the nation.” (p. 92)

Sand, however, is an atheist, and does not believe in the supernatural elements found throughout the Biblical narratives. Neither did the Zionist historians, but they nevertheless sought to preserve the history, even though in the Bible the creation, success and survival of Israel depends on constant supernatural intervention. For Sand this is inconsistent. He says of one such historian, Simon Dubnow, that:

From now on, it would be possible to relate the history of the Jews almost exactly as it was told in the Old Testament, minus the wonders and miracles (supposedly these were volcanic natural phenomena) and the heavy religious sermonizing. History now appeared clothed in a more secular garb, freed from divine metaphysics but wholly subordinate to a specific, well-defined protonationalist discourse. (p. 97)

This secularized Old Testament history was pushed out into the popular consciousness through the schools in Israel where it was taught as simply Jewish history. Sand will have none of it, and in fact thinks that Israel was polytheistic until the Babylonian exile when monotheism emerged from contact “with the abstract Persian religions”, developed in contact with late Hellenism (p. 125) and was written back into history with the creation of the Biblical writings.

It was the Babylonian exile, he thinks, that created the Jewish self-consciousness of a people in exile. “Jewish monotheism began to take shape among the cultural elites who were forcibly deported after the fall of the kingdom of Judah ... and the imagery of exile and wandering already reverberates, directly or metaphorically, in a major part of the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings...” (p. 129) His third chapter, however, focuses on the “second exile” of the year 70. “It must first of all be emphasized that the Romans never deported entire peoples.” (p. 130) “Flavius Josephus, the historian of the Zealot revolt in the year 66 CE, is almost the only source for this exile, aside from archaeological findings dating to that time.” (pp. 30-131) Josephus claimed that “1.1 million people died in the siege of Jerusalem and the great massacre that followed, that 97,000 were taken captive, and that a few thousand more were killed in other cities” but “a cautious estimate suggests that Jerusalem at that time could have had a population of sixty thousand to seventy thousand inhabitants.” “Rome’s great Arch of Titus shows Roman soldiers carrying the plundered Temple candelabra—not, as taught in Israeli schools, Judean captives carrying it on their way to exile. Nowhere in the abundant Roman documentation is there any mention of a deportation from Judea.” (p. 131)

“So what” Sands asks, “was the origin of the great myth about the exiling of the Jewish people following the destruction of the Temple?” He cites research from “numerous contemporary rabbinical sources that in the second and third centuries CE the term *galut* (exile) was used in the sense of political subjugation rather than deportation... Other rabbinical sources refer to the Babylonian exile as the only *galut*, which they regarded as ongoing, even after the fall of the Second Temple.” (pp. 133-134) “It seems that the source of the discourse regarding the anti-Jewish exile lies in the writings of Justin Martyr, who in the mid-second century linked the expulsion of circumcised men from Jerusalem after the Bar Kokhba revolt with divine collective punishment.” (p. 134) “It was in the Babylonian Talmud, however, that the first statements appear linking the exile with the fall of the Second Temple. A Jewish community had existed in Baylonia continuously since the sixth century BCE.” (p. 134)

Recognizing the problem with claiming an historical first-century expulsion, some Zionist historians turned to another explanation.

But if there was no expulsion, it was still necessary to have a forced exile; otherwise it would be impossible to understand the “organic” history of the “wandering” Jewish people, which for some reason never hastened to return to its homeland. The start of the “exile-without-explusion” was different from the exile that Jewish tradition mistakenly dated to the fall of the Temple in the first century CE—the long exile was in fact considerably shorter, because it began only with the Arab conquest. (p. 139)

Sand then turns to a review of Jewish communities residing outside of Palestine, the exiles who never returned from Babylon, large communities in Parthia in Roman times, and of course the several communities in Egypt. These, he argues, could not account for the enormous size that these populations latter reached except by conversion.

The topic of proselytism causes him to turn back several centuries to review the rise of the practice in Israel itself. The Hasmoneans began to expand their borders and Judaize the inhabitants of the land. In 125 BC they conquered Edom and forced the Idumean inhabitants to undergo circumcision and observe Jewish law. In 104-103 BC came the annexation of Galilee and the forced conversion of the Itureans. Alexander Janneaus made similar, but less successful, efforts to bring the coastal cities and their people into Israel. As these Hellenistic people resisted conversion, he destroyed their cities. The same problem and solution arose with the absorbing of Samaria. But Sand is at pains to argue that, in their own way, the Hasmoneans were thoroughly Hellenistic.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that, but for the symbiosis between Judaism and Hellenism, which, more than anything, turned the former into a dynamic, propagative religion for more than three hundred years, the number of Jews in today’s world would be roughly the same as the number of Samaritans. Hellenism altered and invigorated the high culture of the kingdom of Judea. This historical development enabled the Jewish religion to mount the Greek eagle and traverse the Mediterranean world. (p. 161)

There follows a lengthy review of proselytism and conversion in the Hellenistic world and early Roman Empire.

But what happened to all those Jews in Palestine? “In 324 CE the province of Palestine became a Christian protectorate, and a large part of its population became Christian. ... It appears that the disappearance of Jews from the country coincided with the conversion of many of them to Christianity.” (p. 179) Yet a significant Jewish presence remained.

Baer, Dinur and other Zionist historians were not mistaken in stating that this significant Jewish presence was drastically reduced following the Muslim conquest in the seventh century, but this was not due to the uprooting of Jews from the country, for which there is no shred of evidence in the historical record. (p. 180)

During the Byzantine period, despite the persecutions, a good many synagogues were built. But after the Arab conquest, construction gradually came to an end, and Jewish prayer houses grew scarcer. It is reasonable to assume that a slow, moderate process of conversion took place in Palestine/Land of Israel, and accounted for the disappearance of the Jewish majority in the country. (p. 182)

The remainder of the chapter digs through the Zionist historians’ treatment of this claim, first accepting it, and expecting that the Palestinian agricultural population would recognize and gravitate towards the superior culture of the Zionist immigrants, and then giving it up following the violent rejection of Zionists by the Palestinians.

The next sixty pages review the conversion of populations around the Mediterranean and Black seas to Judaism to form the bulk of the ancestry of modern Jews. “From the Arabian Peninsula to the lands of the Slavs, the Caucasus and the steppes between the Volga and Don rivers, the areas around the destroyed and then rebuilt Carthage, the pre-Muslim Iberian Peninsula, Judaism continued to gain believers, thus securing its impressive presence in history.” (p. 190) During the years of the Roman Empire before Constantine, Judaism was legal, while Christianity was banned and persecuted. Thus those attracted to monotheism found Judaism an attractive option. Also there was a state of semi-conversion, which was found acceptable, where people became God fearers or “heaven worshippers” without taking on the rigors of full observance of the Jewish laws. Thus there was a swelling of Jewish and Judaized populations up until the establishment of Christianity, following which proselytism by Jews was banned and eventually severely punished, at which time the growth dropped off.

These are the converted populations that Sand discusses:

- Tribes of the Arabian peninsula who converted shortly before the rise of Islam: Qaynuqa, Auraiza, Nadhir, Taima and Khaybar. “The spread of Jewish monotheism, which was not yet rabbinical, must have helped prepare the spiritual ground for the rise of Islam.” (p. 191)
- The Kingdom of Himyar at the southwest end of the Arabian Peninsula, converted to Judaism around the year 380.
- Phoenicians and Berbers in the Maghreb.

- Iberians, mainly proselytized Roman soldiers, slaves and merchants, later supplemented by immigrants from North Africa.
- The Khazars, originally a coalition of Turkic and Hunnic-Bulgar clans, with hegemony over the Iranian speaking Scythians and Alans, and of Magyars and Slavic tribes. They converted to Judaism around the eighth century. Besides subjugating neighbors and extracting tribute, they were major slave traders. It was here that the Yiddish language began to take form, perhaps as a trade language among merchants. The decline of the kingdom seems related to the successful emancipation from them by the Slavs in the tenth century. With the arrival of the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century, many of the inhabitants moved west into Eastern Europe.

In view of his thesis that the people calling themselves Jews are, in general, the offspring of proselytes, we would expect Sand to face the DNA evidence resulting from studies searching for common genetic traits of these Jewish populations. Sand does so, citing various claims and then other papers that contradicted them. We can, however, ignore what Sand has to say on the matter, as his book came in the early days of this research. There has been much better work since which 1) incorporates some samples of ancient DNA to give a historical basis for comparison, 2) includes far larger population samples, and 3) examines a larger part of the genetic material of each subject. The reader can examine these studies for himself. A good one to start with is “The Origins of Ashkenaz, Ashkenazic Jews, and Yiddish” as it also includes an historical study of the linguistic component of this ethnicity. (Frontiers in Genetics, 21 June 2017, <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fgene.2017.00087/full>)

Of course, even if the majority of those today calling themselves Jews are the descendants of proselytes, not of Abraham, it does not mean that descendants of Abraham do not exist in these populations. But if the concept of a Jew is to be such a person, a descendant of Abraham and of the ancient population that entered Canaan under Joshua, then the people called Jews are not as a whole what that definition calls a Jew. There may be a small minority that could establish such an identity, such as the Cohanim, perhaps, for which there seems to be a genetic marker, but not the majority.

For the Orthodox, or other observant Jewish groups, this might not be so much of a problem, though they do not like the conclusions of Sand’s book. Yet, as a religious community, they can relate a Jewish identity to adherence to their community and its observances. Ironically, they can save their Jewish identity only by adopting a sort of replacement theology, something for which they fault the Christians. Christians (setting aside the dispensationalists, who make this temporary during the “church age”) hold that the Church is the new Israel, and has taken the place of the Jews in God’s ongoing purpose, though there is a continuity because the early church was in fact made up of Jews who maintained their covenant with God. The religious Jew must hold that it is the proselyte who takes the place of the Jew by physical descent, though as with Christianity there is an initiating core group of the physical descendants. For the Zionists this is not the case. Though they maintain a sort of Jewish religious establishment in the State of Israel, it is mainly a non-observant state, and many even are atheists. Thus the Zionists continue to need the Jewish people to be constituted by descent, not by religious adherence, to justify their program.

Of course, as Sand mentions, the very idea of descent is complicated by the switch from the ancient patriarchal Jewish culture to the idea accepted by the Orthodox today that a Jew is someone with a Jewish mother. Thus descent is even conceived of differently.

Then there are the weird branches of Christianity, such as dispensationalism, that have tied their theological distinctives to the idea of a continuing people constituting what they call national Jews, the descendants of Abraham, who become the focus of history as an identifiable, self-aware people, identical to those who generally go by the name Jew today, especially as they act as Zionists. It is just these people that Sand identifies as a construction, a fiction. The dispensationalists, claiming to be the most biblicist of all Christians, in fact have incorporated an extra-biblical Jewish historical fiction into their central theological conception.

There has been an angry response to Sand, particularly by the secular Jews. They call him a self-hating Jew, indulging in fantasies without evidence. The responses of this type that I have read strike me as being that very shallow and hate-filled writing of which they accuse Sand. Of course, one can fault Sand for dismissing Biblical teaching, but he has a point that as an atheist he cannot believe it, and that the Zionists should not be allowed to combine the authority of the Bible with their anti-supernaturalism.