

Shlomo Sand, *The Invention of the Jewish People*, (trans. from Hebrew by Yael Lotan) London: Verso, 2009, 332 pp+xi, index AUD 60.00.

Reviewed by Christopher J. Davey

This book is potentially important in the context of Middle East peace and has implications for much popular Christian theology. However it is its view of southern Levantine history that is significant for archaeologists.

The Hebrew version of the book was published in Israel in 2008 where it has been on bestseller list while in France it won the Aujourd'hui Award. Sand currently teaches contemporary history at the University of Tel Aviv and although his book relies heavily on research and opinions of Jewish scholars, it is causing controversy amongst Israelis because it questions the basis for the Israeli State.

The thesis of the book is that Judaism is a religion and that Jews are not a people in an ethnic, national or biological sense. Sand argues that the modern myth began with Heinrich Graetz's *History of the Jews* (1853-1876) and has been promoted by Zionist thinkers, especially after 1929. The 1948 *Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel* states that 'After being forcibly exiled from their land, the people kept faith with it throughout their Dispersion and never ceased to pray and hope for their return to it and for the restoration in it of their political freedom'. Sand argues that this is fiction.

The Roman capture of Jerusalem in AD 70 led to the expulsion of Jews from Jerusalem, but Sand argues that there is no evidence that there was a general expulsion of Jews from Palestine. He also believes that there is credibility to much early twentieth century Jewish thinking which held that the Palestinians, especially the rural village people, largely descend from Old Testament period people such as the Judeans and Israelites and that many of them converted to Islam after the seventh century AD partly as a way of avoiding Islamic taxes. The observations of the nineteenth century historical geographers who found that many village names preserved Old Testament place names would tend to support this view of Palestinian history.

The book also documents the evidence for the conversion to Judaism of people including the Himyars (Yemen), Berbers, Punics and Khazars. There is evidence that some of the Muslim armies entering Spain were composed of Berbers who were proselytized Jews. On the other side of Europe in the seventh century the Jewish Khazar Empire was established and it is from these people that Ashkenazi (European) Jews descend. This latter point has long been known, but Sand adds documentation and describes a variety of modern Jewish reactions. It is ironic that Ashkenazi Jewish Israeli settler movements certainly have no biological link to Old Testament people, the Sephardim (Oriental) Jews may sometimes have such a link, while the Palestinians probably do.

Sand begins the book with a scholarly discussion of academic views of ethnicity, nationality and people-hood and concepts of racism. This section will be difficult reading for those not familiar with the issues and it is not unreasonable to leave it to read last.

The last chapter traces the often bizarre contortions of Israeli scholars, judges and legislators as they try to distinguish Jewishness and identify the people upon whom the State should confer favour. He deals with the impossibility of Israeli nationality, with religion and state, genetics, Israeli marriage laws, the Law of Return and argues that Israel is not a democracy but rather a 'Jewish ethnocracy with liberal features' (307). He states that 'no Jew who lives today in a liberal Western democracy would tolerate the discrimination and exclusion experienced by the Palestino-Israelis' (309). Israel, he states, could not join the European Union or become a state of America because of its undemocratic laws.

For Sand the solution to the current conflict may be achieved by establishing a democratic bi-national state between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. He acknowledges how difficult it will be for Israeli Jews to take such a step, but he suggests that Israelis need to realise that a homogeneous nation-state is now and always was impossible given the ethnic diversity of Palestine and the Jewish migrants.

Discarding the idea of being the 'chosen people' and 'to cease isolating itself in the name of a fanciful history and dubious biology and excluding the 'other' from its midst' (313) will be, in Sand's mind, the hardest issue for Jews to deal with. The other side of the coin for Jews is not considered by him; it is that Judaism has attracted many converts over the years. Christians have also had a similar prejudice believing that Judaism is unappealing and that Jews were only ever born.

The treatment of early Israeli archaeology describes Ben Gurion's interest in the enterprise and the activity of Yadin and Aharoni. Sand adopts the approach of Thomas L. Thompson and Israel Finkelstein over and against the position of Yadin arguing that the Old Testament was written as metaphor in the Persian and early Hellenistic periods. The books main propositions though, do not depend on this aspect of the argument as Sand's historical point of departure is AD70.

If recent archaeological thought has acknowledged anything it is that the past is complex. Sand's perspective is compatible with many modern archaeological trends. The acceptance of complexity, cultural and ethnic diversity, and occupational continuity are now normal. The changes in political entities and ruling elites are not now assumed to be replicated in the country-side.

The culture-history methodology of early twentieth century archaeologists promoted an uncomplicated, even simplistic, interpretation of archaeological evidence with respect to the origins of ancient Israel and the United Monarchy. This

same methodology can be detected in much current Israeli Roman period archaeology. Sand's work warns us that the simple historical propositions on which the State of Israel are based should not be accepted as axiomatic.

Keith Whitelam, *The Invention of ancient Israel* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996) argued that the Palestinians have been denied a history because of Western scholars' preoccupation with Israel, ancient and modern. He assumed that the Palestinians descended from people other than ancient Israel and by adopting a view that the Old Testament was a fabrication he argued that there was an opportunity for the Palestinians to have their own history. If Sand is correct the ethnic divisions assumed by Whitelam, and most Western scholars for that matter, that have led to the dispossession of the Palestinians are not valid.

It is time that some attention was given to the public archaeology of the last two thousand years in Palestine where significant early evidence for Christianity and Islam may be found. Unfortunately much current archaeological inquiry is being driven by the political need to find evidence for the Jewish occupation of Palestine, especially in areas such as Gallilee. If Sand is correct, this evidence may be encountered in many of the remains of the 531 Palestinian villages destroyed by the Israeli forces in 1948.

Speaking at the Al-Jazeera Forum in Doha, Qatar, on 24 May 2010, former South African president Thabo Mbeki, compared the South African and Palestinian experiences and concluded that the main difference is that in Israel-Palestine there is no agreed objective whereas in South Africa the belligerents could and did agree on what was most fundamental regarding the future of the country. The conflict in Israel-Palestine is largely defined by historical concepts, many of which are distorted according to Shlomo Sand. Archaeology has the potential to redress some of the distortion, but only if it is freed from narrow nationalist goals.

The Sand proposition offers freedom to investigate the history, cultures and peoples of the southern Levant more reliably and without the hindrances presented by the myths used to sustain modern Israel and Western Middle Eastern politics. Unfortunately these myths, which determine much of the West's dominant self-image, will ensure that that freedom will be some time in coming. Ultimately Sand is proposing democracy in the southern Levant and the separation of academic inquiry, religion and state; not that controversial one would have thought.