

The Palestinian Cultural Basin

The Valleys of Hebron

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By Ali Qleibo

here is no prototype Bedouin,” Dr. Emanuel Marx, expert on Al-Naqab nomadic culture, smiled gently in answer to my query about the authentic characteristics of the “true” Bedouin. “The stereotypical

image of the Bedouin as the lonely, rugged nomad with a camel and a tent is merely an adaptation to a particular environment.”

Throughout history, our nomadic predecessors’ interaction with the environment has been a complex dynamic intellectual process, conditioned by the primordial process of “sedentarization” within the basin of the Mount Hebron valleys as they were inhabited by successive waves of nomadic tribes. The semiarid geographic region, a cultural eco-niche, is a backbone of Palestinian civilization and highlights our ancestral heritage and cultural patrimony, as testified in the extensive archaeological sites that are spread throughout the region.

The pioneering Hurrites’ dynamic perception of, adaptation to, and intuitive interaction with the natural environment structured and conditioned the unique socioeconomic system and the religious, ideological, and spiritual legacy to which the diverse Semitic and non-Semitic ethnic waves of invading settlers adapted themselves. The rain-dependent, frail ecosystem that is vulnerable to

“Ethnographical observation does not confront us with the alternative of either a plastic mind passively reflecting the ecology outside, or universal psychic laws unfolding everywhere the same inborn properties, mindless of the ongoing history of each group and of the concrete features of its natural and social surroundings.”

Structuralism and Ecology, Claude Levi Strauss

dramatic climatic changes has prodded an ever-shifting process of adaptations, whereby the environment came to yield infinite resources. This dialectic structured and conditioned the Palestinian unique spiritual legacy that the diverse later religions adopted within the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim discursive narratives.

Long before the Amorites and the legendary arrival of our father Abraham, the Hurrites, and in their footsteps the Canaanites, had forged the first spiritual relationship in Palestine. The Semitic categories of thought, high/low, sacred/profane, male/female, and pure/impure were triggered by the Palestinian topography. The rugged, rocky, mountainous terrain exudes a prescient sense of the holy. Intimations of the “Other,” the elusive mystical feeling of a transcendent presence, is inextricably related to the land. The early nomadic settlers’ initial confrontation with Palestine’s environment – the mountains, caves, water springs, seasonal changes, and trees – have come to imbue the Holy Land with its mythos. Our mountaintops were perceived as the natural habitat of the gods. Chief in their pantheon was El ‘Elyōn, which, in English, may be rendered as “God Most High.” The contemporary Palestinian mountaintops are dotted with sanctuaries, domed rooms amidst oak groves or huge carob trees. These remote holy shrines, albeit under Muslim mystic Sufi veneer, attest to the pervasive intimations of the other, sensed throughout Palestinian history as residing in high places. Innumerable *bimot* (Canaanite high religious places) have been absorbed within the classical

Judeo-Christian-Muslim tradition and have become part of the Palestinian national cult of St. George, known alternately as Mar Jiries in the Greek Orthodox tradition or Al-Khader in the Muslim narrative. In Greek icons, Mar Jiries may be depicted alone or in conjunction with the rain-bringer St. Elijah, Mar Elias. Alternately, Sufi Islam empowered these high places to become the popular sanctuaries that dot the landscape astride mountaintops, under the generic name of Al-Sheikh Saleh, the good sheikh. They may also survive under the garb of Biblical iconography, such as the sanctuary of Noah in Dura, Lot in Beni Naim, Matthew in Bet Ummar, Esau in Al-Seir, Jonah in Halhul, and Samuel southwest of Jerusalem. The primordial



■ Prophet Abraham en route to Egypt, portrayed as a nomadic Bedouin with Ishmael and Isaac.

Canaanite precept of Palestine as the Holy Land has played a major role in shaping the human person’s relationship to god and that of god to the human person in festivities and fertility rites that celebrate the new season and that punctuate the Palestinian peasant’s agricultural cycle, also present in the Greek Orthodox liturgical calendar.

The chasm that separates humans from their divinities parallels the binary opposition of high/low, sacred/profane, and pure/impure. Semites are fundamentally aniconic. Whereas deities dwelled high, humans were restricted

to dwelling below. By extension, the two natures, human and divine, were strictly separated. Aniconism means that rather than using figural images as objects of worship, abstract symbolic forms such as standing stones were used in the representation of deities. The principal sacred object in pagan ancient Semitic religion was the stone, either a rock outcropping or a large boulder, often a rectangular or irregular black basalt stone without representative sculptural detail. Betyls, a Greek anagram of the Semitic word Bet El,

into a resource, and can be viewed as the origin of the pragmatic adaptability of the Palestinians to the diverse challenges in war and peace, under contemporary occupation and in the diaspora. Throughout history, Palestinian society has preserved its tribal structure of social solidarity within the clan. Unity within the four-generation family unit is one of its most salient political, economic, and religious structures.

As early as the Bronze, Iron, and Biblical periods and up to the



■ Al-Jurn al-Kabir is a remarkably arid geological formation in the shape of a basin strewn with quartz. For millennia the valley served as an access road between Wadi Araba in the east to Gaza and Asqalan on the Mediterranean.

house of the head of the Canaanite pantheon El, was represented generically in the shape of cubes, cones, triangles, or rectangles. Such stones were thought to be the residences of a god, hence the term for them, employed by Byzantine Christian writers in the fifth and sixth centuries.

In the lengthy process of ecological adaptation to the new environment, the nomadic perception did not merely reflect and react to but also incorporated the new ecological and techno-economic resources, working them into a system that was conducive to the survival of the tribal structure as an integral whole. The complex dynamic process underlies the transformation of the environment

end of the nineteenth century, the valleys of the Hebron mountains have formed a cultural basin into which the diverse tribal nomadic waves from the deserts of Al-Naqab and Sina forced their way into Palestine. Those successive invading nomadic tribes expanded into the mountainous hinterland in endless raids and counter raids (*ghazzu*), looting and stealing livestock and basic stored staples, expanding into new pastureland, usurping power, supplanting tribal chiefs, and replenishing the population. The image of captive chieftains locked in a cave and killed by the invading tribes is a common theme in the Old Testament and haunts Palestinian historical narratives until

the nineteenth century when the Ottomans quelled the chaos and built the city Beer al-Sabe' as an administrative center in the heart of Al-Naqab.

The roadway into the hinterland followed the course formed by the three major valley basins. The expansive cultural basin extends from the confluences of the western network of valleys into the Mediterranean Sea and from the eastern valleys into the Dead Sea, and via Wadi Araba to the Red Sea. This geographic cultural expanse marks the homeland for the various tribes from Al-Naqab. In their demographic territorial expansion towards Mount Hebron along the semiarid valleys, the nomadic tribes, their way of life in itself an adaptive strategy, made further readjustments as they moved from a mode of subsistence dependent on animal husbandry to a settled agrarian pastoral mode of production.

Two major valleys radiate westward. Their confluence at the Mediterranean forms Wadi Gaza in Gaza, and Wadi al-Namel in Asqalan (Ashqelon). Eastwards, a third major valley descends, beginning at Bani Na'im via Wadi al-Mintar towards the Dead Sea and Wadi Araba. In this geographic region, at the foothills



■ Nabateans and Edomites used pyramids on top of tombs to connect the dead underground with the gods above. These symbolic liminal stones in association with tombs are referred to as *betyl-nepeshh*.

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of Mount Hebron, Early Bronze Age Semitic settlements thrived as city-states; Marissa in Beit Jibrin, Lachish (Tell al-Duweir), Azeka (Zakariya), Dhahiriya, Tell al-Sabe' (Beer Sheva), Beit Mirsim, Debir (Rabud), and Beit Maqdam, to name a few. Our Edomite and Nabatean ancestors developed the small Neolithic settlements of Subeita, Abdeh, Karnaba in the northern Naqab into great trade centers along the spice route from Yemen to Asqalan and to Gaza and thence to Greece.

The formidable Wadi al-Khalil (Hebron Valley) drifts southwards through Al-Dhahiriya and past Beer al-Sabe' to reach the Mediterranean at Wadi Gaza. Barely thirty kilometers farther north on the Mediterranean lies Wadi al-Namel in Asqalan. The valley



■ Edomite temple reused by Nabateans in the acropolis of Abda. The walled city stood along the caravan spice road from Yemen via Mecca, the Red Sea, and Wadi Araba to Gaza. Abda, one of the chief centers for wine export, had vineyards that were irrigated by an extensive irrigation system that ensured that not a single drop of water was wasted.

begins in Halhul to form Wadi al-Qif that winds through Beit Jibrin and is further enriched by tributaries from the famed Lachish. Each tributary and each twist and turn of these valleys bears a distinct name that is associated with different nomadic tribesmen. The respective names, their genealogical charts, traditional territories, and history are preserved for posterity in the Arabic discourse known as *Ilm al-Ansab*, science of kinship structures.

The Mount Hebron valleys provided the environment that has over the past six millennia served as a cultural niche, replenished the early settlements which straddled mountaintops, and infused the mythos of the land with its spiritual tenor. From time immemorial, Wadi al-Namel in Asqalan, Wadi Gaza in Gaza, and Wadi Mintar in Bani Na'im have been associated with holy shrines of local fame: Al-Muntar of Wadi Namel and Yaqin. Two of these ancient sanctuaries on the Mediterranean, where the mountains meet the sea, were consolidated, updated, and revitalized under a Muslim Sufi veneer by Saladin in the twelfth century as centers of local pilgrimages on par with Nabi Musa near the Dead Sea. Previously, during the Fatimid period (tenth to twelfth century), Wadi al-Namel acquired great prestige as the sanctuary Mashhad al-Hussein, where the head of Al-Hussein, the grandson of

Prophet Mohammad, was enshrined for a few years before it was moved to Cairo into the famous Al-Hussein Mosque. The beautiful pulpit of the Mashhad al-Hussein Mosque was moved to its present place in the mosque of Hebron during the Mamluk period when the fortifications of Asqalan were torn down, lest the Crusaders take shelter within them. Unfortunately, the Israelis leveled the mosque after occupying it and forcibly evicting the Palestinians from their homeland during the *Nakba*.

Mount Hebron is a peninsula that juts into Al-Naqab Desert. On the eastern side of Mount Hebron, a third major valley, Wadi al-Mintar, descends from the village of Bani Na'im towards the Dead Sea and forms the trail that is followed by nomadic tribes from Al-Naqab and from the Arabian Peninsula along Wadi Araba, famed for its copper mines that were first excavated by our Edomite ancestors and came to be associated with King Solomon's wealth.

The sanctuary of Yaqin on the outskirts of Bani Na'im, a promontory over the extensive system of valleys winding down to the Araba Valley, provides an insight into the multidimensional aspect of religious-cultural syncretism and highlights the problematic that is involved with using archaeological ethnography to interpret modern cultural expressions: over time, perceptions change.

Each culture is a totalizing, closed system of signification in terms of which the various cultural expressions acquire their referential value. Homology in form does not reflect structural semantic similarity. Merely because a sanctuary or shrine (*maqam*) is located in a place that corresponds to the Canaanite sacred "high place" and may have been a Canaanite sanctuary (*goren*), we cannot assume that it was used later on in the same way by, for example, the Edomites, even if the present-day people are descended from the earlier ones. Religious symbolism and all aspects of socioeconomic life are closely related to the particular details of the individual culture in a particular time and space.

In Yaqin, which commands a spectacular panorama that includes the Dead Sea, the Muslim discourse situates Abraham in the apocalyptic moment when God unleashed his wrath on Sodom.

As Abraham watches the cataclysmic event, he comes to the firm conviction in God's promise ("I bear witness that this is the truth of certainty," a rough translation of the verse from the Qur'an). The rock sank in the ground and in another spot his foot stamp left a deep imprint in the rock. According to Muslim travelers throughout the ages, the place derived its name from his renewed confirmation of his faith in God, *al-yaqin* in Arabic.

The sanctuary that enshrines the sunken rock leads to a cave underneath where Fatima, the granddaughter of Prophet Mohammad from his cousin Ali ben Abi Taleb, is believed by the locals to be buried.

■ A private Edomite villa outside the city walls of Abda. The arch is remarkably similar to the famous arches in Dura.

The contiguous Sina and Al-Naqab deserts merge as the backbone of Palestinian culture, and the geographic basin formed by the major valleys in Mount Hebron presents the ecological context for the onset of the process of "sedentarization" of the Semitic nomads throughout time. This lengthy process in the form of raids and counter raids (*ghazzu*), which entail stealing, pillaging, and usurping land and water wells and expanding into new territories (*diyar*) – itself a form of ecological adaptation – may well be the case with the Hurrites, Amorites, Canaanites, Jebusites, Edomites, Habirus, and Nabateans.





■ Wadi Khursa, southwest of Mount Hebron, is one of the many tributaries of Wadi al-Khalil and starts in the village of Khursa.

A few kilometers away stands the sanctuary where Lot is believed to be buried. Until quite recently, Bani Na'im, interestingly, had been famous for the plethora of sacred trees associated with various folk rituals.

Situated within Nabatean and Edomite spheres of religious influence, the sanctuary in Yaqin reveals the multidimensional aspect of the sacred rocks. Betyls for the Edomites and later the Nabateans were erected not exclusively as houses of god but also to mark the burial place, nephesh-betyls. On the other hand, from the Biblical perspective, Jacob's betyl, the ladder to God uniting heaven and earth, derived from a theophany which took place at that spot; the point at which the transcendent is believed to enter the immanent. The tomb, however, may be seen as a liminal point of contact between the

worlds of the dead, of the living, and of the gods. Lying betwixt and between, communication between the world of the dead and that of the gods parallels Jacob's ladder to the sky and for the Edomites was consecrated as a connecting link between the different levels of the universe. At this interstice, the followers of the Edomite religion set up the betyl-nephesh in their cemeteries.

The dynamic process of ecological adaptation to the environment, the cultural diversity of which the Canaanite nascent city-states were composed, and the influences of the various peoples with whom the Palestinians mixed, reveals a tapestry of life that has witnessed continued adaptations that structured and conditioned the unique

socioeconomic system, religion, and spiritual legacy to which the diverse ethnic Semitic and non-Semitic settlers adapted themselves later on. These peoples are innumerable and include the Hurrites, Amorites, Jebusites, Canaanites, Hebrews, Edomites, Arameans, and Arabs. Ancient non-Semitic peoples were composed of diverse origins: Greeks from Crete, Ionia, the Black Sea, Anatolia, and Lydia were followed by Babylonians, Hellenic Greeks, Roman legions, Persians, Byzantines, Crusaders, Kurds, and Turks. In modern history, Egyptians, British, Jordanians, and Israelis have played an ever-increasing role in reorganizing the ecological system, expanding our resources in new directions, and reshaping Palestinian modern identity. Heirs to all these peoples and cultures, Palestinians can claim neither racial genetic purity nor ontological cultural homogeneity.

Palestinian cultural identity has been produced within the context of Palestinian geography and bears structural continuity with primordial Semitic categories of thought. Throughout history, each period was merely a fleeting moment that in its transient fragility represented a momentary socioeconomic dynamic adaptation of the culture to the available resources, thus ensuring the survival of the family within the tribe.

Palestinians remain a tribal people whose elementary kinship unit was dynamically structured by the early pattern of cave dwellings that formed the ancient cities and hamlets that remained inhabited well into the twentieth century. In modernity, the locus of the extended family, the subunit of the tribe (*hamuleh*) in the Palestinian village, is invariably the *hosh*, the four-generation family-living courtyard.

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■ Wadi al-Namel was the scene of the annual local pilgrimage reinstated by Saladin following the defeat of the Crusaders in Asqalan. Highly favored as the burial grounds for Al-Naqab nomadic Bedouins, a special sanctuary was built there to mark the meeting place of mountain and sea.