

Identity, Nationalism, and Placenames: Zionist Efforts to Preserve the Original Local Hebrew Names in Official Publications of the Mandate Government of Palestine

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Placenames promote identification and connection, and serve the ideological needs of those who give the names. In this context, I examine Zionist efforts during the British mandate in Palestine to preserve the original Hebrew names found in the Bible and other ancient sources as placenames in Palestine in the documents, correspondence, and official signs of the mandate government. The Zionists gave to placenames in Palestine a special role for advancing their ideological-national goals and for maintaining a connection between the Jews in Palestine and the diaspora with their historical homeland. I also examine the British attitude to these Zionist efforts and conclude that this attitude was related to Britain's overall approach to the issue of Palestine.

Introduction

One function of placenames is to foster identification and ties between the individuals or the societies who give the names and the sites themselves. Stewart, for example, noted that in the United States "At first all the thin scattering of names along the eastern coast had been Indian; later many had been Dutch and Swedish; then after the English occupied the country, they made the names over to fit English speech" (1945, 108). In Delaware "the oldest placenames...were, indeed, products of changing national ownership..." (Weslager 1976, 101). The Dutch town of Santhoeck was renamed New Castle by the English.¹

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Peterson notes that political considerations were one reason for many of the name changes after the 1917 revolution and creation of the Soviet Union. The new government wished to erase as many signs as possible of the previous regime. The practice continued and many years later in the distant eastern republics, the original Chinese names were changed in order to weaken China's historical claims to these territories (1977, 16-20).

The existence of Arabic placenames in Spain can be attributed to the period of Muslim rule (Sopher 1955). In Iran, the Shah adopted a policy of changing the names of many cities when he rose to power in 1926. These new names symbolized the state and his dynasty. The Shah even changed the name of the country from Persia to Iran in 1935. The policy in Iran of changing placenames to enhance the power of the dynasty continued until the overthrow of the Shah in 1979 (Lewis 1982).

The names of many streets in Beirut were changed by the Lebanese government after the termination of the French mandate there in 1943. These changes were made by the Lebanese in an effort to eliminate all vestiges of the previous occupations and to develop an independent Lebanese identity. The religious complexity of Lebanon is such that the variety of street names in Beirut reflects the need to be responsive to a number of the religious groups established there (McCarthy 1975, 74-88).

Placenames thus serve the goals of deepening identification and connection, and of advancing national ideological aims. Israel, where Zionists gave names to Jewish settlements in Palestine beginning with the renewal of Jewish settlement at the end of the nineteenth century, is a case in point. Forty percent of the names given were found in the Bible and the Talmud. One of the primary reasons for choosing traditional names was ideological-nationalistic. The names were a vital tool in rooting the new Jewish inhabitants in their ancient homeland, since names taken from ancient Jewish sources symbolized the continuity of the Zionists in the Land of Israel (Kliot 1989/90, 83-90; Cohen and Kliot 1981, 246- 276). Since 1967 the names given by the Israeli government to Israeli settlements on the Golan Heights, in the West Bank, and in the Gaza Strip also have been efforts to advance national ideological goals (Cohen and Kliot 1992, 653-80). The practice — until recently — of calling the West

Bank by its biblical names *Judah* and *Samaria* was directed toward achieving this same goal.

Even though the Zionist movement was primarily secular, biblical names or names alluding to ancient Jewish sources have served as national symbols (Cohen and Kliot 1992, 659). Indeed, the Zionist Names Committee established in the 1920s and which was the Zionist body officially responsible for assigning names to new Jewish settlements in Palestine until the establishment of the state of Israel, declared from the outset that priority would be given to the renewal of historical Hebrew names for sites in Palestine. This same principle was announced by the Names Committee in Israel² (Central Zionist Archive Information Circular 1938; Arikha 1937, 3-7; Kliot 1989/90, 77; Bitan 1992, 366-70; Derzie 1993, 2-3, 98-9).

In this article I will examine an additional facet of the special role that Zionism assigned to placenames in Palestine for advancing its ideological-national goals. This is the effort made by Zionism during the period of British rule in Palestine (1917-1948) to preserve the original Hebrew names (which appear in the Bible and in other ancient Hebrew sources) of sites in Palestine in all the documents, correspondence, and official signs of the mandate government which appeared in Hebrew. The response of the British to this effort will also be considered. This article is based primarily on material from the Central Zionist Archive and the Israel State Archive (ISA), which preserve extensive records from the mandate period.

The Official British Directives

During the mandate, the British issued two official documents which gave directives to the civil service in Palestine concerning the spelling and pronunciation of the names of geographic places in Palestine in English, Arabic and Hebrew. This was done for purposes of official correspondence and for printing various signs that were the responsibility of the government. The first document, *First List of Names in Palestine* (Permanent Committee 1925), listed some 360 names of places and sites in Palestine. The body responsible for the publication was the Permanent Committee on Geographical Names for British Official Use (PCGN). This committee, which was based in London and worked in consultation with the Royal Geographical

Society (RGS), submitted a draft of the document to the High Commissioner in Palestine. The Commissioner gave the draft to Jewish and Arab authorities in Palestine for their comments (ISA Memorandum 1933). The Jewish body which dealt with this issue was the Jewish Society for the Study of the Land of Israel — a volunteer Zionist organization which still exists — composed primarily of Jewish experts in archaeology, geography and history of the land of Israel, and its flora and fauna. Alongside 145 placenames printed in Arabic and English, the Society listed what it considered to be the appropriate Hebrew names. The Society did not provide Hebrew names for the balance of the names in Arabic and English that were in the British document. Forty-five of the 145 names were of Jewish settlements that had been established since the end of the nineteenth century. It is not clear how many of the 145 names in Hebrew had already been written in the draft of the PCGN, nor is it known how many corrections were entered by the Society. What is relevant here is the fact that the list submitted by the Society was accepted in its entirety by the PCGN, and, on the basis of this list, the Hebrew portion of the *First List of Names in Palestine* was published in 1925 (Ben-Zvi 1931, 4).

The second official publication, issued in Jerusalem in late 1931, was the *Transliteration from Arabic and Hebrew into English, from Arabic into Hebrew and from Hebrew into Arabic, with Transliterated Lists of Personal and Geographical Names for Use in Palestine*. This 85-page document contained a list of more than 1,100 placenames in Palestine — more than three times the number published by the British in 1925. The purpose of this publication was first to provide a list of geographic names in Palestine in the three official languages (English, Hebrew and Arabic) and second to serve as a binding guideline to civil servants "in all official correspondence and documents, and on signboards, street names, etc., for which the Government or Local Authorities are responsible...." (1).

In contrast to the 1925 booklet, this list was published by the government of Palestine and written by the Department of Education, headed by Humphrey Bowman. Also unlike the 1925 booklet, the writers of the 1931 publication did not consult with Jewish bodies nor even with appropriate London bodies such as the PCGN, although the RGS system of transliteration from Arabic and Hebrew

into English was adopted. The authors of the later publication were apparently opposed to the PCGN, which had in 1925 accepted without question the Hebrew list of placenames provided by the Jewish Society for the Study of the Land of Israel (ISA Letter 1932a). Thus, in compiling the list of placenames in Hebrew, the Department of Education had simply used the Arabic names, transliterating them from Arabic into Hebrew. This practice contrasted with that of the 1925 listing, which replaced more than one-third of the Arabic placenames with Hebrew names based on the Bible and ancient Jewish sources. In the 1931 publication, the majority of the names which had appeared in Hebrew in the earlier booklet had been changed (with the exception of the names of Jewish settlements founded since the end of the nineteenth century). For example, in the Hebrew listing of 1925, the Hebrew name *Ashdod* was used rather than the Arabic name *'Isdud*. In the 1931 Hebrew listing, however, *Isdud* appeared, transliterated into Hebrew. Similarly, in the 1931 Hebrew listing, the Arabic name *'Asqalan* (transliterated into Hebrew) was given, rather than *Ashqelon*, which is common in Hebrew, appears in Biblical sources, and also appeared as *Ashqelon* in the 1925 list. Even *Nablus*, according to the 1931 Hebrew listing, should be transliterated into Hebrew, while the generations-old name *Shekhem* could only follow it in parentheses³ — as had been done with *Palestine (E.I.)*, where *E.I.* stood for *Eretz Israel* 'the Land of Israel'.

Shortly after the 1931 publication appeared, changes of place-names began to be made by the management of the railway, the post, and the telephone and telegraph services. Changes were entered into the telephone directory, in postal documents, and on signs at railway stations. For example, the *Vale of Sorek* train station was changed to *Wadi es-Sarar*, *Shekhem* was changed to *Nablus* and *Nazareth* to *En-Nasira* (Ben-Zvi 1931, 6).

The Zionist Response

The Zionist response to the 1931 document appeared shortly after its publication. In a special memorandum sent by the Vaad Leumi, the General Council of the Jewish Community of Palestine, to the General Secretary of the Government of Palestine, a copy of

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which was sent to the Permanent Mandates Commission of the League of Nations, the Zionist leadership of the community in Palestine, headed by Izhak Ben-Zvi, vehemently protested "the transparent attempt and the clear trend" of the British to Arabize placenames in Palestine. They emphasized that

the strange trend for Arabization of the Hebrew names damaged both historical and scientific veracity by the insulting distortion of the Hebrew names from the original standard Hebrew form which exists in holy writings and Talmudic literature, a bastardization that is a crass offense to the Hebrew language. All this is extremely insulting to the sensibilities of the members of the Jewish community in Palestine, and we are certain that when this book reaches the hundreds of thousands of Jews in the diaspora, it will bring them insult and pain.... We express our emphatic opposition to the measures carried out by the management of the railways and the management of the post and telegraph to actually change the historical Hebrew names cited in the Bible which are in use by the Jewish inhabitants to this day, and which had been approved and used by the government of Palestine — from their Hebrew form to the bastardized form...and these changes have already been made on signs at railway stations, the post, and the telephone directory.... (Ben-Zvi 1931, 3-6)

The Vaad Leumi demanded correction of the publication

so that the directives will correspond to the historical truth, will meet the needs and convenience of the residents, and for the political rights of the Jewish people and its language.... We demand that the directives to make changes in the railway stations and the telephone directory be rescinded, and that the Hebrew names be restored.... (Ben-Zvi 1931, 3-6; ISA Letter 1933a; 1933d)

However, the Vaad Leumi did not stop with this general demand. It appointed a committee of experts that included specialists in geography, history and archeology from the Jewish Society for the Study of the Land of Israel and its Antiquities and from the faculty of Hebrew University and charged it with proposing principles for amending the 1931 British publication. This committee established the following rules which were then directed to the government of Palestine:

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1. Every place which has an historical Hebrew name — from the Bible or from such later sources such as the Apocrypha, the New Testament, Hellenist literature, the Mishnah, the Talmud or the Midrash — should be given its Hebrew name for use in Hebrew, even places which also have a name in Arabic with no resemblance at all to the original Hebrew name. For example, just as in the 1931 British publication, the Hebrew names *Yerushalayim* 'Jerusalem' and *Hevron* 'Hebron' were accepted, but not their Arabic names *El-Quds* or *El-Khalil*. Similarly *Adoraim* should be retained in Hebrew and not the Arabic name *Dura*, since *Adoraim* appears in Chronicles, Maccabees and other texts.

2. Every place whose Arabic name is from a Hebrew source should appear in Hebrew in its original Hebrew form, e.g., *Ashqelon* and not '*Asqalan*, *Anatoth* and not '*Anata*, *Beit Dagon* and not *Bayit Dajan*.

3. Names which do not have a Hebrew literary source, but could be adapted to Hebrew without changing the consonants but only the vowels should be spelled in Hebrew according to the Hebrew pronunciation. For example, *Beit* should be written and not *BayEt*, *Kefar* rather than *Kafar*, *Dair* rather than *Dayer*, *Beit Sahr* rather than *Bayet Sahur* and *Dair Eyuv* rather than *Dayer Aiyub* (Ben-Zvi 1931, 4-6, 17-92).

Using these rules, the Vaad Leumi added to its memorandum an appendix of 760 placenames from among those which appeared in the 1931 British publication, and for which the Vaad Leumi demanded that amendments be made. About 280 of the 760 were names cited in the Bible, the Mishnah, the Talmud, or other ancient sources, as well as relevant research literature (international and Jewish, from the end of the nineteenth century until the beginning of the 1930s) that dealt with the identification of places in Palestine, which was intended to give scientific validity to the Zionist argument (Ben-Zvi 1931, 15-92). Thus, use was made of the studies of the Palestine Exploration Fund (1881), Clermont-Ganneau (1896-9), Dalman (1924), Guérin (1868-75), Maisler (1930), Schrader (1940), Smith (1904), Schwarz (1845), Sapir (1911), and others.

The following are representative of the placenames for which amendments were demanded, to illustrate the nature of the Zionist claim: *Tiv'on* in the Haifa district and not *Tuabun*, as it appears in the 1931 publication, with sources and references including the Mishnah tractate *Makhshirin*, Mishnah tractate *Niddah*, supplement to the *Niddah* tractate, Dalman's work (1924) and others (Ben-Zvi

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1931, 76).⁴ *Ophrah*, north of Jerusalem in the Ramallah district, appeared as *Et-Ta'yiba* in the 1931 British publication, although it appears as *Ophrah* in sources including Joshua, Samuel I and Dalman's work (Ben-Zvi 1931, 76).⁵ A third example is *Hazor* in the Safed district, which is listed as *Waqqas* in the 1931 publication, although it appears as *Hazor* in Joshua, Judges, Maccabees I, modern archaeological studies and other works (Ben-Zvi 1931, 82).⁶

British Retreat From the 1931 Document

The 1931 government names document drew protests not only from the Vaad Leumi, but also from government departments, the Palestinian civil service, and even the British Parliament. Most of the criticism focussed on errors which were not necessarily related to issues raised by the Vaad Leumi, even though Parliament had come out against the absence of Hebrew Biblical names (ISA Letter 1932a). With the criticism of the Vaad Leumi, other censure, and the demand by the Permanent Mandates Commission of the League of Nations that the government of Palestine address the concerns of the Vaad Leumi, the subject preoccupied, among others, department heads in the Palestine government, the High Commissioner, the British Colonial Secretary, and the Foreign Minister (see correspondence in ISA File E/20/31). Humphrey Bowman, director of the Department of Education, formulated a response in consultation with the director of the Antiquities department. Bowman conceded that the principle of the Vaad Leumi should be accepted concerning places which had borne Hebrew names for hundreds of years, such as *Ashqelon*, *Mt. Carmel* and *Mt. Tabor*, or in cases where the Hebrew names were based scientifically on topography or archaeology, such as *Gezer*. Nevertheless, Bowman would not accept the entire list of names derived from the first rule of the Vaad Leumi because, in his view "the lists submitted by the Vaad Leumi apply Biblical and Talmudic names to many places neither traditionally called by those names nor scientifically identified" (ISA Letter 1932a). With regard to the list of names derived from the second rule, Bowman suggested that a committee of local experts be formed to examine the demands of the Vaad Leumi. As for the list derived from the third rule, Bowman expressed his agreement, but added that this rule should

also be used to transliterate into Arabic the Hebrew names of the Jewish settlements (ISA Letter 1932a).

Bowman's views notwithstanding, the British government decided in June 1932 to officially revoke the publications of names that had been issued by the government of Palestine in 1931. The Palestinian government was rebuked for not having involved the PCGN in writing the document. The British government directive noted that the binding document from then on would be the 1925 booklet and that the principles established there would be the basis for a new publication that would include a larger number of names than that issued in 1925. The reason for the decisions of the British government seem to be related not only to the protest expressed by the Vaad Leumi, but also to the criticism raised by other bodies concerning the 1931 publication. At any rate, the Department of Education was asked to coordinate efforts to issue a new publication of placenames in Palestine, in cooperation with the PCGN (ISA Letter 1932b). Even the Permanent Mandates Commission in its summer session of 1933 heard a report by British representatives concerning revocation of the 1931 publication (ISA Letter 1933b; 1933c). In the spring of 1934, however, the Vaad Leumi lodged a protest with the General Secretary of the government of Palestine claiming that the postal service, the telegraph, and the railway department were continuing to operate according to the 1931 publication (ISA Letter 1934).

Throughout the 1930s, the government of Palestine, the Colonial Office, and the Foreign Ministry in London debated the publication of a new edition of placenames in English, Hebrew and Arabic. Various opinions were expressed concerning such a publication (see the correspondence in ISA File E/20/31). Although some changes and amendments were made in transliterating Hebrew and Arabic placenames into English, and binding directives were issued concerning the English versions of names (ISA Letter 1936), a new official publication of Hebrew placenames was not issued until the very end of the mandate period. The criticism of the problematic 1931 publication seems to have alerted the government of Palestine to the complexity of the issue of names in Hebrew. Although it acknowledged errors in the 1931 publication, it could not accept the comprehensive list of alternative names prepared by the Vaad Leumi

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(which meant in effect Hebraicizing many placenames which were not in use at the time), whether for political reasons in the context of deteriorating Jewish-Arab relations and England's stance on this issue⁷ or because it felt that the matter required a scientific investigation by neutral parties. The 1925 booklet continued officially in effect for names in Hebrew, and a qualifying directive was added stating that the designated Hebrew names would be the ones used by Hebrew speakers in Palestine for generations, the names in current use⁸ (*The Palestine Gazette* 1941, 1).

Indeed one can observe the application of these principles in official British publications issued in Hebrew from the second half of the 1930s. For example, in the translation into Hebrew of the Palestine Royal Commission Report of 1937 we find the Hebrew names for *Beit Shean* (not *Bysan* as published in 1931), *Ashqelon* (not 'Asqalan), *Shekhem* (not *Nablus*), *Nazareth* (not *En-Nasira*), and *Akko* (not 'Acaa). On the other hand, the same document uses the name *Jenin* transliterated into Hebrew (which was in daily use also among Jews at this time) and not 'Ein Gannim, as it appears in the 1925 booklet of names and the appendix attached to the Vaad Leumi document of 1931 (Permanent Committee 1925, 6; Ben-Zvi 1931, 46).

Discussion and Conclusion

Throughout history, placenames have been changed to encourage identification and ties between the ideology of those who make the change and the place, in an effort to advance national ideological goals. New names are intended to provide new identifications and new connections. Here, we have examined one such effort to advance national ideological goals by means of placenames. In this case, however, the previous historical names were revived and preserved, rather than newly created. Zionism as the Jewish national movement did not need to invent new names; the original Hebrew names — from the Bible and other ancient Hebrew texts — were viewed as the best way to provide Jewish-Zionist identification and connection to the territory of Palestine. Thus, the Zionist struggle to *revive* Hebrew names was similar in many respects to the cases cited at the beginning of this article, where similar goals necessitated *changing* the names.

The Zionist aim to revive the historical Hebrew placenames in Palestine served an important function in achieving the national and political goals of Zionism. The importance was both internal and external. The names deepened the identity and connection between the Jewish people and their historical land and they also provided an additional means of reinforcing the Zionist case as it was presented to the British, to other international bodies, and to the Arabs regarding the historical entitlement of the Jewish people to political rights in the country to which they returned. Therefore Zionists could not be unresponsive to the 1931 British document which, by transliterating into Hebrew a very long list of Arabic placenames in Palestine, in effect severed the connection and Jewish continuity with most places in Palestine. Conversely, British response to the corrections demanded by the Vaad Leumi in 1931, and publication of a new official document in the spirit of these demands, would have served the Zionist goals very well. Hence the Vaad Leumi did not merely demand revocation of the 1931 British names document, but also publication of a new document which would include all the names listed by the Vaad Leumi based on scientific authorities. The appeal to scientific authorities was characteristic of the Zionist struggle on various issues during the mandate period, since it was clear to the Zionist leadership that only well-founded claims could help achieve their aims.⁹

Why did the government of Palestine, in issuing the 1931 list of names, almost entirely ignore Hebrew placenames, as well as the official 1925 booklet of names? Although this question requires a separate study, the answer may be related to the fact that the Department of Education, which was responsible for producing this document, was almost entirely occupied with the Arab sector. The system of education in the Jewish sector was managed autonomously by various Jewish bodies. Furthermore, the number of Jews employed by the Department of Education was apparently quite small, both proportionally and absolutely (Bowman 1941, 251-67; Reuveny 1993, 161-77, 235-36).

Even though the British government revoked the 1931 document and thus responded to some of the Zionist demands, it could not authorize a new publication which would meet the demands of the Vaad Leumi and provide a long list of placenames in Hebrew. The

government understood the political significance of such a publication, which would give support, if only partial and symbolic, to the Zionist demands regarding Palestine. As the 1930s progressed and the Jewish-Arab conflict worsened (e.g., the riots in 1936-39), the British government tended toward a pro-Arab stance (in contrast with that of the early 1920s)¹⁰ and was increasingly reluctant to publish a new list of names in the spirit of the Zionist demands. The British could justifiably claim that the matter of names required scientific investigation by a neutral party — especially since most of the names in the Zionist list were not in daily use even by the Jewish population. On the other hand, the British could call for official use of those placenames in Hebrew that had been used for generations and were even then current.

Notes

1. See also Stewart (1954, 4).

2. It is interesting to note that key figures in the Zionist leadership in Palestine during the pre-state period also viewed Hebrew surnames as a national-political tool, and they encouraged Jews in Palestine to replace their non-Hebrew surnames with Hebrew names. Izhak Ben-Zvi (who later became the second president of the state of Israel, and who had replaced his own Eastern European name *Shimshelovich*) appealed to the members of the Executive of the Vaad Leumi in November 1947 to adopt Hebrew surnames and thus serve as an example to the general Jewish population of Palestine:

I see the Hebrew name as a valuable symbol which emphasizes our national make-up no less than the language. Our predecessors did not say for naught, 'due to three things, our forefathers were redeemed from Egypt: that they did not change their names, their language, or their clothing.' Indeed a name also has great political-cultural meaning for us and for others.... Our public and diplomatic appearance must be Hebrew, and, first and foremost, the name manifests one's appearance. We must demand of the public, each and every one, to remove his foreign name and to appear with a Hebrew name. (Central Zionist Archive Letter 1947)

3. Compare the *First List of Names in Palestine (Permanent Committee 1925)* with the *Transliteration from Arabic and Hebrew*.

4. The Jewish settlement of Tivon was founded in the same district in 1947.

5. The Jewish settlement of Ophrah, one of the first of Gush Emunim (a right-wing religious-nationalist movement in Israel) was established after the 1967 war in the same district (cf. Cohen and Kliot 1992).

6. In 1952 in the same district, the development town known as *Hazor HaGlilit* was founded.

7. The reference is to Arab riots that erupted in the spring of 1936 and continued intermittently until 1939, and rejection by the British government of the concept of partition as a solution to the problems of Palestine. The Arabs vehemently opposed partition, and the British government at the time felt it must take a pro-Arab stance, since it feared the Arabs would side with the enemy if a war in Europe broke out and England had adopted the idea of partition. See Cohen 1978; Katzburg 1974, 35-44, 55-66.

8. A similar principle concerning the adoption of those placenames that are currently in use was established in the 1890s by the United States Board on Geographic Names. See *Second Report of the U.S. Board on Geographic Names 1890-1899* (1901, 15, 22).

9. See the Zionist arguments during the mandate period on the issue of the absorptive capacity of Palestine (Reichman, Katz, and Paz 1991, 206-20). See also the Zionist arguments from 1938 about the possibility of partitioning Jerusalem into a Jewish city and a mandatory city, as opposed to the position of the Royal Commission of 1937, which proposed that all Jerusalem should be under mandatory rule (Katz 1993, 41-53).

10. See note 6. The British pro-Arab stance could already be seen in 1930 with publication of the report by Sir John Hope-Simpson which stated that there was no room in Israel in the near future for additional settlement of new immigrants. Simultaneously, the British issued a White Paper asserting that Palestine did not have sufficient cultivable land for agricultural settlement of new immigrants, except for those lands already held by the Zionist authorities.

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