



Book Review: Palestine: A Four Thousand Year History by Nur Masalha

Mohammed H. Al Aqad
Postdoctoral Research Fellow
Hashim Sani Centre for Palestine Studies
Universiti Malaya, Malaysia
alakkadmohmad@um.edu.my¹

ABOUT THE BOOK AUTHOR:

Professor Nur Masalha is a distinguished Palestinian historian and a prominent scholar at the Centre for Palestine Studies, SOAS, University of London. With a career dedicated to decolonizing historical narratives and reclaiming indigenous Palestinian perspectives, he has authored several influential works that critically examine Zionist historiography and the politics of memory. Professor Masalha also serves as the editor of the Journal of Holy Land and Palestine Studies, contributing significantly to academic discourse on Middle Eastern history and settler-colonial studies. His key publications include Expulsion of the Palestinians (1992), A Land Without a People (1997), The Politics of Denial (2003), The Bible and Zionism (2007), and The Palestine Nakba (2012). His scholarship is widely recognized for its rigorous historical methodology and its commitment to justice and narrative restoration in the context of Palestine.

INTRODUCTION: Reclaiming Palestine's Historical Continuity

In the introduction, the author challenges the prevailing notion that Palestine is a modern construct, asserting instead that it has existed as a continuous geopolitical and cultural entity for over four millennia. He critiques the Eurocentric and Zionist historiographies that have sought to erase or marginalize Palestinian history, emphasizing the importance of indigenous narratives. Masalha employs a multidisciplinary approach, drawing from archaeology, cartography, and toponymy to reconstruct Palestine's historical landscape. He underscores the significance of place names and their transformations over time, illustrating how colonial powers have used renaming as a tool of domination. This foundational chapter sets the stage for a decolonized reading of Palestinian history, advocating for a historiography that centers Palestinian voices and experiences.

Chapter 1: The Philistines and Philistia as a Distinct Geo-political Entity: Late Bronze Age to 500 BC

This chapter begins by examining the Philistines, a people who settled along the southern coast of Canaan during the Late Bronze Age. He argues that Philistia was a distinct geopolitical entity with its own culture, language, and political structures (Masalha 1992, 1997). Contrary to biblical depictions that portray the Philistines as antagonists to the Israelites, archaeological evidence suggests a more complex and nuanced relationship between these groups. Masalha highlights the

^{*1} Mohammed H. Al Aqad, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Hashim Sani Centre for Palestine Studies, Universiti Malaya, Malaysia, alakkadmohmad@um.edu.my

continuity between Philistia and later Palestinian identities, challenging narratives that seek to disconnect modern Palestinians from their ancient predecessors. This chapter lays the groundwork for understanding Palestine as a historically rooted and continuous entity. (antoineonline.com)

Chapter 2: The Conception of Palestine in Classical Antiquity and During the Hellenistic Empires (500–135 BC)

This chapter explores how the term "Palestine" entered classical usage, particularly during the Hellenistic period. Masalha traces the etymology of "Palestina" and its adoption by Greek and Roman writers to describe the region. He examines how Hellenistic rulers and scholars conceptualized Palestine, often through orientalist lenses that exoticized and othered its inhabitants. Despite these external impositions, local cultures persisted, adapting to and resisting foreign influences. Masalha emphasizes the resilience of indigenous identities and the ways in which they navigated the complexities of Hellenistic rule. This chapter underscores the importance of critically engaging with classical sources to uncover the lived experiences of ancient Palestinians. (Bloomsbury Publishing)

Chapter 3: From Philistia to Provincia 'Syria Palaestina' (135 AD–390 AD): The Administrative Province of Roman Palestine

Following the Bar Kokhba revolt, the Roman Empire renamed the region "Syria Palaestina" as part of a broader strategy to suppress Jewish identity and assert imperial control. Masalha examines this renaming as an act of colonial erasure, aimed at reconfiguring the region's identity to align with Roman interests. He analyzes administrative records, legal documents, and archaeological findings to reconstruct the socio-political landscape of Roman Palestine. Despite imperial efforts, local populations maintained their cultural practices and resisted assimilation. Masalha highlights the continuity of indigenous traditions and the ways in which they adapted to the changing political context. This chapter illustrates the complexities of identity formation under colonial rule.

Chapter 4: The (Three in One) Provincia Palaestina: The Three Administrative Provinces of Byzantine Palestine (4th–Early 7th Centuries AD)

During the Byzantine period, Palestine was divided into three provinces: Palaestina Prima, Secunda, and Tertia. Masalha explores the administrative, religious, and cultural developments within these provinces, focusing on the rise of Christianity and its impact on local communities. He examines the construction of churches, monastic institutions, and pilgrimage sites, highlighting the region's significance in early Christian history. Masalha also addresses the interactions between Christian, Jewish, and Samaritan populations, emphasizing the pluralistic nature of Byzantine Palestine. This chapter provides insights into the region's religious transformations and the ways in which they shaped its socio-political fabric. (ia601600.us.archive.org)

Chapter 5: Arab Christian Palestine: The Pre-Islamic Arab Kings, Bishops, Poets, and Tribes of Provincia Palaestina (3rd–Early 7th Centuries AD)

Masalha delves into the often-overlooked history of Arab Christian communities in pre-Islamic Palestine. He highlights the roles of Arab kings, bishops, poets, and tribes in shaping the region's cultural and political landscape. Through an analysis of literary texts, inscriptions, and ecclesiastical records, Masalha reconstructs the vibrant Arab Christian presence that predated Islamic conquests. He challenges narratives that portray Arab identity as solely Islamic, emphasizing the deep-rooted and diverse nature of Arab cultural expressions in Palestine. This chapter contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the region's religious and ethnic diversity. ([Gale Learning Resources](#))

Chapter 6: The Arab Province of Jund Filastin (638–1099 AD): Continuities, Adaptation, and Transformation of Palestine under Islam

With the advent of Islamic rule, Palestine became known as Jund Filastin, one of the administrative districts of the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates. Masalha examines the continuities and transformations that occurred during this period, focusing on urban development, agricultural practices, and religious institutions. He analyzes the integration of Islamic governance with existing local structures, highlighting the adaptability of Palestinian society. Masalha also addresses the coexistence of Muslim, Christian, and Jewish communities, emphasizing the pluralistic nature of Islamic Palestine. This chapter illustrates the dynamic interplay between continuity and change in the region's history. ([Bloomsbury Publishing](#))

Chapter 7: Between Egypt and al-Sham: Palestine during the Ayyubid, Mamluk, and Early Ottoman Periods

This chapter explores the political and cultural developments in Palestine under the Ayyubid, Mamluk, and early Ottoman dynasties. Masalha analyzes the region's strategic importance, situated between Egypt and Greater Syria (al-Sham), and how this influenced its governance. He examines the patronage of religious and educational institutions, the construction of architectural landmarks, and the flourishing of intellectual life. Masalha also addresses the challenges posed by external invasions and internal conflicts, highlighting the resilience of Palestinian society. This period is characterized by both continuity with previous eras and the emergence of new socio-political dynamics. ([Bloomsbury Publishing](#))

Chapter 8: Palestinian Statehood in the 18th Century: Early Modernities and Practical Sovereignty in Palestine

Masalha challenges the notion that Palestinian nationalism emerged solely in response to Zionism, arguing that forms of Palestinian statehood and sovereignty existed in the 18th century. He focuses on figures like Dhaher al-Umar, who established autonomous rule in parts of Palestine, fostering economic development and political stability. Masalha examines the administrative structures, trade networks, and diplomatic relations that characterized this period, highlighting the agency of Palestinian leaders. He contends that these early modernities laid the groundwork for later

nationalist movements, emphasizing the indigenous roots of Palestinian political aspirations. This chapter reconfigures understandings of Palestinian history by foregrounding local initiatives and governance. ([Blinkist](#))

Chapter 9: Being Palestine, Becoming Palestine: Rediscovery and New Representations of Modern Palestine and Their Impact on Palestinian National Identity

In this chapter, Masalha explores the formation of modern Palestinian national identity, tracing its evolution through literature, art, and political discourse. He examines how Palestinians have engaged with their history and heritage to construct narratives of belonging and resistance. Masalha analyzes the role of intellectuals, poets, and activists in articulating a collective identity that draws from diverse cultural and historical sources. He also addresses the impact of colonialism, displacement, and diaspora on the shaping of Palestinian consciousness. This chapter underscores the dynamic and multifaceted nature of national identity formation.

Chapter 10: Settler-Colonialism and Disinheriting the Palestinians: The Appropriation of Palestinian Place Names by the Israeli State

This chapter concludes by examining the Israeli state's efforts to appropriate and Hebraize Palestinian place names, viewing this as a form of settler-colonial erasure. He analyzes the policies and practices aimed at rewriting the geographical and cultural landscape to align with Zionist narratives. Masalha argues that this toponymic transformation serves to disinherit Palestinians from their ancestral lands, undermining their historical claims and identities. He situates these practices within broader frameworks of colonialism and decolonization, calling for the recognition and restoration of indigenous place names. This final chapter reinforces the book's central thesis: that reclaiming historical narratives is essential to resisting colonial domination. ([Barnes & Noble](#))

Now that we have provided a general note on the content covered in the book, it is only appropriate to discuss what the conglomeration of all the content covered in the book would bring about. First, it must be noted that the book successfully aims to improve our understanding of Palestinian history as a long-standing, deeply rooted, and continuously evolving civilizational narrative. By synthesizing multiple historical periods, from the Philistine age through Byzantine and Islamic governance, to modern nationalist consciousness, Nur Masalha constructs a compelling counter-narrative that dismantles reductionist and settler-colonial interpretations of the Palestinian past. His use of archaeological, linguistic, religious, and administrative records, combined with a decolonial historiographical approach, enables the reader to grasp the significance of Palestine not merely as a political entity but as a cultural and historical continuum.

Moreover, the book contributes to broader scholarly conversations on memory, identity, and spatial justice, illustrating how toponyms, cartographic manipulations, and historiographical erasures have been central to the logic of settler-colonialism. By restoring indigenous perspectives and voices, the book challenges academic complicity in epistemic violence and underscores the moral imperative of historical truth-telling.

Cumulatively, the book calls on historians, educators, and policymakers to reframe how Palestine is taught, narrated, and situated in both local and global discourse. It invites a reconsideration of Palestine not as a “problem” to be solved, but as a civilizational subject with its own epistemologies and historical agency. In doing so, *Palestine: A Four Thousand Year History* does not merely document a past—it intervenes in the present and gestures toward a future anchored in justice and recognition.

RECOMMENDATION

Finally, as a recommendation for improvement, the inclusion of a companion website that could provide *interactive maps, digitized archival documents, historical timelines, and annotated bibliographies* would significantly enhance the reader’s engagement with the content. Given the book’s interdisciplinary nature, which spans archaeology, historical geography, religious studies, and postcolonial theory, a digital supplement could serve as an invaluable pedagogical tool for students, educators, and researchers alike. Such a platform could visually demonstrate the evolution of place names, showcase primary source materials referenced in the text, and host short video lectures or interviews with the author and contributing scholars. It would also allow for periodic updates in light of new discoveries or shifting political contexts, thereby ensuring the book remains a living and evolving academic resource. Furthermore, in an era increasingly shaped by digital humanities, providing open-access resources that complement the book’s thesis would not only extend its reach but also democratize access to Palestinian historical knowledge, particularly for audiences in the Global South or conflict-affected areas. This kind of multimodal scholarly engagement would deepen the impact of Masalha’s work and encourage broader, more nuanced public conversations on the history and identity of Palestine.

Personal Reflection as a Palestinian Researcher on Palestine: A Four Thousand Year History by Nur Masalha

As a Palestinian researcher, reading *Palestine: A Four Thousand Year History* by Nur Masalha is both a deeply affirming and intellectually invigorating experience. The book does more than revisit historical narratives, it reclaims them. For too long, Palestinian history has been framed from the outside, often distorted by colonial and Zionist discourses that have sought to fragment, marginalize, or erase our collective past. Masalha’s work stands as a monumental corrective to this erasure.

What resonates most profoundly is his insistence on indigenous continuity that Palestinians are not a modern invention nor a recent population, but rather inheritors of a millennia-old civilization rooted in Canaanite, Philistine, Arab, Islamic, and Christian heritage. This narrative, so meticulously documented, restores agency and dignity to Palestinian identity. It also affirms what many of us know through oral history, cultural memory, and lived experience: that our belonging is ancestral, not contingent.

Furthermore, Masalha's integration of decolonial methodologies is especially vital. He does not merely write history; he disrupts epistemological violence. His critique of biblical archaeology, analysis of toponymic appropriation, and exposure to settler-colonial historiography all contribute to a radical reshaping of how Palestine should be studied and understood.

From an academic standpoint, the book offers a robust foundation for further research, especially for young Palestinian scholars seeking to anchor their work in a historically grounded yet critically engaged framework. As a Palestinian, I see this book as part of a broader intellectual resistance movement that challenges imposed silences and replaces them with historical truth, narrative justice, and cultural resilience.

In sum, *Palestine: A Four Thousand Year History* is not only a scholarly achievement but also a declaration of historical presence. Masalha presents a structured academic perspective, asserting that Palestine is historically real while Israel is fake. The book reaffirms that Palestine is not a vanishing past but a living, rooted, and enduring reality. For any Palestinian academic, this book is not optional reading; it is essential.

REFERENCES

Masalha, N. (2018). *Palestine: A Four Thousand Year History*. London. Zed Books, London, UK

Masalha, Nur (1997) *A Land Without a People* (London: Faber and Faber).

[Palestine: A Four Thousand Year History by Nur Masalha, Paperback | Barnes & Noble®](#)