Book review


In his book That Noble Dream, in the chapter entitled “Every Group its Own Historian,” Peter Novick analyzes the breakdown of American historiography into many narratives, each representing a distinct group in modern American society. Abraham David’s book on the Jews of what he names Eretz Yisrael, the land of Israel, during the Sixteenth Century, illustrates a similar phenomenon, whose sources are varied, including new and unedited manuscripts, some even from the Cairo Geniza, which rarely has been culled in research on the Ottoman period. This book is best judged as part of the corpus of studies analyzing the political and religious struggles through which various groups still vie, and have vied, for the physical possession and, more, the right to possess, a certain piece of land. It is rare that these studies do not figuratively wear the intellectual and, especially, the religious moorings of their authors on every page. There is no agreement even about the name to use to identify this piece of land. For Jews, it is, in Hebrew, and as in David’s study, Eretz-Yisrael, or the Land of Israel; for Christians, the Holy Land; and the Palestinian-Arabs, Filastin, Palestine, or South Syria. There is even less about borders. Whether in historical writing or archeology, let alone outright political studies, the scholarly product invariably reflects conflict; research by the members of one of these three groups usually ignores the work of the members of others and favors its own national movement exclusively. This was already true of Zionist historical writing as much as one hundred years ago, long before Palestinian and Arab historical writing began. Zionist writing tends toward separatism and isolationism, and it views Jewish history as immanent, sometimes even with a hint to divine inspiration, and somehow disconnected from the world outside and the course of its events. In recent years, this Zionist historiographical vision has been challenged, ironically, by having its traditional weapons turned back on itself. Palestinian and Arab histories have exploited traditional Zionist-style motifs, speaking of the Palestinians in nationalistic terms, emphasizing territorial claims, promoting myths of creation, and asserting a continuity of settlement, these latter two buttressed by pointing to what are said to be recently unearthed ancient remains.

David’s book belongs to the traditional Zionist school. It focuses on the Jews in the Land of Israel (in the Zionist vocabulary – “the Yishuv”) in the period of Ottoman rule that lasted from 1516 to 1917. I myself engage in similar research, and the
following reflections are thus as introspective as they are critical (in the constructive sense of the term); in the words of Carlo Ginzburg, “If not me against myself – who would be against me?”

The book has three parts. The early chapters survey the various stages of Jewish immigration during the Sixteenth century, the geographical distribution of settlements, and economic conditions, as well as Ottoman policy toward Jews. In each of these chapters, Jews alone are discussed, in distinct isolation. No comparisons are made, nor are Muslim Arabs, Christian Arabs, other Muslims like the Druze, as well as European Christians, who together composed the majority of the population, considered. On page 34, in the chapter named “Distribution of Settlements,” a map indicates only the settlements inhabited by Jews. Yet, in these settlements, the Jews were a minority. The reader might believe that only Jews lived in the twenty-seven settlements named and that they were Jewish settlements rather than essentially Arab ones. Hundreds of Arab villages and townships are not indicated at all. More, at this time these villages were all known by their Arabic names. These Arabic names are sometimes used, Anglicized, of course. But the book occasionally substitutes Hebrew names for Arabic ones. In the sixteenth century, these names were never used. Still other villages are given English names, actually translations from Arabic; the translation obscures this fact.

The two central parts of the book discuss exhaustively the prime sixteenth century Jewish communities of Safed and Jerusalem, including the Jewish neighborhood(s), demographic issues, Jewish communal organization, and spiritual life. Toward the close of the book, a chapter describes the struggles that took place between the Jews of the two towns. An appendix contains the biographies of scores of contemporary rabbinic settlers. Once again, Jewish is treated in isolation with no mention of the activities of non-Jewish neighbors.

It is not that one is prohibited from dealing with specific groups in historical research. One need not write a combined history of all the sectors of society in order for a historical work to be valid. But one cannot, and this is the point of what I am saying here, deal with any single group as though the other does not exist. This piece of historiographical wisdom seems so obvious that it should be self-understood. But the experience of historical writing as it touches the region known as Palestine-Eretz Yisrael, the Holy Land shows that it has been anything but that. So ingrained are exclusivist patterns, moreover, that not only is there no single agreed upon name, but it has been an exercise in rhetorical gymnastics to avoid, as has consciously been done in this review, choosing which of the above three names to use. By adopting any one of the names, an author’s identity, given the history of historical writing in this region, is ipso facto established. Historical writing indeed mirrors real life, and gazing into this mirror has become increasingly dissatisfying.