

## **Theological Cartography and the Arboreal Imagination in Israel-Palestine**

Alain Epp Weaver

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In the late 1960s, Elias Chacour, then a newly-ordained priest of the Melkite (Greek Catholic) church, made his first return visit to the ruins of Kafr Bir'im, from which he, along with his fellow villagers, had been expelled by Israeli military forces at the age of six and from which he had been barred for two decades.<sup>1</sup> Bir'im, for centuries a Christian village in the northern Galilee, was one of over 500 Palestinian towns destroyed in 1948 in the course of what Israelis call the War of Independence and Palestinians name as the *Nakba*, or the catastrophe; its 1,050 inhabitants were among the over 700,000 Palestinians who became refugees.<sup>2</sup> On November 13, 1948, the Israeli military ordered the villagers to leave Bir'im, allegedly because of security concerns, promising that they would be allowed to return after a few days. After weeks and then months passed without their being allowed to return, Bir'imites petitioned the Israeli Supreme Court, which upheld their right to return. The military responded on September 17, 1953, by placing explosive charges around the homes and bombing the village from the air while the villagers looked on from a nearby hill. Over the coming years, Bir'im remained off-limits as a closed military area for the expelled villagers, even as the Israeli state turned over portions of the village's land to two *kibbutzim* (Baram and Sasa) and a *moshav* (Dovev) and in the mid-1960s opened a national park and a nature reserve on top of Bir'im's ruins.

Chacour, who had entered the newly opened Baram National Park as a tourist, moved quickly through the toppled stones of the destroyed village, at first finding himself

“once again a small boy rushing home through the fig trees.” Then, “any illusion of the past was broken,” as he surveyed the ravages of humanity and time: “The [family] orchard itself was a ruin. For some reason it had been deserted and now grew unpruned except by the straying winds of God. The house, too, was a shambles.” Overcome with emotion, he began to turn away from the rubble of his family home when “Something in the yard stopped me. There, firmly rooted and still green with life, grew my special fig tree.”<sup>3</sup>

The pivotal role played by trees in Chacour’s autobiographical narrative and in his theological analysis stands as one instance of how the arboreal imagination animates Israeli and Palestinian mappings of space and landscapes of return. The planting of trees asserts connection to the land and covers over traces of prior habitation, while oak, fig, olive, and pomegranate trees become sites of memory for the imagined Palestinian refugee landscape. Examining Bir‘imite practices and discourses around trees, with particular attention to Chacour’s autobiographical-theological narrative, this paper asks what cartographies the arboreal imagination can produce. Is the arboreal imagination necessarily bound up with exclusivist mappings of erasure only, mappings which encode given spaces as *either* Palestinian *or* Israeli Jewish? Or, as I suggest, might the arboreal imagination animating the imagined landscapes of Palestinian refugees also produce cartographies of mutuality which accept, even embrace, the complex character of shared space?

### **Trees and the Erasure and Production of Space**

To be sure, in some forms of the arboreal imagination the attachment of one people to the land, its rootedness, is linked to the uprooting of others. The Psalmist, for

example, offers a striking image of verdant rootedness for this practice of clearing out a territory in order to implant another people: “You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land.” (Ps. 80:8-11, NRSV). Such an arboreal imagination has helped to shape the Israeli state’s cartographic project of erasing Palestinian traces from the Israeli map, its de-signification of the Palestinian landscape and its transformation of that landscape into a homogeneous space onto which the Zionist program of establishing Jewish hegemony within a particular territory might be realized.<sup>4</sup> Tree planting and deracination by Israeli state and para-state agencies such as the Jewish National Fund (*Keren Kayemet l’Yisrael*, hereafter JNF) and the Israel Nature and Natural Parks Protection Authority (NPA) have played key roles in these attempts at cartographic transformation to cover over former Palestinian habitation, including the ruins of Bir‘im. JNF afforestation at the sites of destroyed Palestinian villages, Carol Bardenstein explains, has been critical in the burial of Palestinian history.<sup>5</sup> While the JNF’s image in the West is primarily associated with tree-planting, for Palestinians, including Bir‘imites, it represents an agency of expropriation through surveying and mapping: it was JNF workers who surveyed Bir‘im’s land prior to parts of it being turned over to Kibbutz Baram.<sup>6</sup>

The NPA has also been instrumental in the transformation of the destroyed Palestinian landscape into Zionist space through the “greening” of that space.<sup>7</sup> Bir‘im, for example, is one of over 120 destroyed Palestinian villages over which tourism and recreation sites operated by the NPA and the JNF have been established.<sup>8</sup> For decades, the official signposts at the park passed over the ruins of Bir‘im’s homes in silence, focusing solely on the remains of a fourth century CE synagogue at the site. The present-

day sign is somewhat more forthcoming, yet it omits more than it discloses, making no mention of the Israeli Supreme Court decision that Bir‘imites should be allowed to return home, remaining mute on the bombing of the village, and failing to address why Bir‘im’s original inhabitants and their descendants are not permitted to return to the village.<sup>9</sup>

Trees also figure prominently within the Palestinian political imagination and in discourses and practices of internally displaced Palestinians like the villagers of Bir‘im.<sup>10</sup> Bardenstein observes that “in the face of Palestinian dispossession, deterritorialization into exile, or occupation,” trees, with their longevity and rootedness, become potent sites of memory production.<sup>11</sup> The olive tree, for example, repeatedly surfaces in the Palestinian imaginary as a symbol of *sumud* (the virtue of steadfastness, a rooted clinging to the land). Trees and other plants also function as what Pierre Nora calls *lieux de mémoire* for internally displaced Palestinians.<sup>12</sup> In return visits to the ruins, plants like the resilient *ṣabr* (prickly-pear cactus, often planted by Palestinians along property boundaries) or fruit-bearing trees (such as olives, figs, and pomegranates) stand out, functioning as “texts to be read,” signposts for the reconstruction and maintenance of the refugees’ mental maps.<sup>13</sup> The arboreal environment is also incorporated by internally displaced Palestinians into what Israeli anthropologist Efrat Ben-Ze’ev calls “rites of return,” such as the preparation and serving of traditional foods under the shade of village trees and picking and eating wild herbs and fruit from specific trees, “sensual experiences, whereby taste and smell play a major role, assisting in the retrieval of memories through embodiment.”<sup>14</sup>

Trees also play a central role in one of the primary ways in which Bir‘imites transmit communal memories in order to strengthen local and Palestinian national

identity, namely, summer camps organized for young children and youth descended from the original inhabitants. Bir‘imites pioneered these “roots and belonging camps” (*mukhayamāt al-intimā’ wa al-judhūr*) in the 1970s—note the arboreal expression of connection—in the 1970s, holding them annually since the mid-1980s.<sup>15</sup> In these camps, community elders lead children in cooking traditional foods, signing folkloric songs, and performing mock wedding ceremonies in a resurrection of village life in the present.<sup>16</sup> Frequent locations for camp activities include two favored sites of Bir‘imite memory: in and around the rebuilt village church and under trees.<sup>17</sup> The young camp participants are called *barā’im*, an Arabic word meaning “buds” (and coincidentally sharing the same root as the village name, *Bir‘im*), another vegetative metaphor deployed to emphasize the organic connection of the villagers to the land and the bond of generation to generation.<sup>18</sup>

At the summer camps members of the community recite poems composed in honour of Bir‘im, verses suffused with arboreal imagery. Through poetry, Bir‘imites teach their youth the geography of the village. Issa Chacour, for example, incorporates the names of two of Bir‘im’s hills (Bayad and Ghazzal) into his poetic portrayal of the village for the campers:

Feast on a dessert of figs, of Bayad and Ghazzal.  
Tarry as you near the grapes  
And when you approach the vine,  
Give thanks, and lift up your voice.  
Your people, Bir‘im, have not died,  
And will not forsake a grain of sand from you.<sup>19</sup>

Another poet, Ibrahīm ‘Īssá, expelled at the age of fourteen from Bir‘im, describes an oak tree in the village cemetery as “the living witness,” its “ground the true document” which can “tell the truth to the invader” and “the occupier,” that “This homeland is ours/And the truth shall not be concealed.”<sup>20</sup> Then, in praise of the olive tree ‘Īssá declares:

You old olive tree  
With roots so deep  
You are the origin  
You are the goal  
You are the truth  
I come today to pick your fruit  
The way I picked it centuries ago  
I come today to pick your fruit,  
Fruit after fruit providing testimony  
They believed the years had killed your branches  
And hoped that your death would conceal the truth  
They believed the years had killed your branches  
And that neglect had withered your vigilant eyes.  
I am returning to prune your branches and relieve  
You from the burden of your emaciated limbs.

Arboreal imagery thus not only testifies in 'Issá's spoken word poetry to the justice of Bir'imite claims to the land, but also functions as a metaphor for a community which has weathered attempts to obliterate it.

Trees also populate poetic visions of future return. In an ode to the village, 'Issá concludes with an invocation: "May its descendants return to erect its buildings and churches, to plant its figs, olives, and pomegranates." This poetic plea not only names the fruit-bearing trees which served as the mainstay of Bir'im's economy, but also evokes God's promise to the people Israel that God will bring them into "a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey" (Deut 8:8). Bir'im, remembered as a lost paradise, thus also becomes the promised land of Bir'imite hopes and dreams, a land conceptualized through an arboreal imagination.

### **The Arboreal Theology of Elias Chacour**

In the autobiographical mappings of Bir'im offered by Elias Chacour, long-time Melkite priest of the Galilean village of I'billīn and today Archbishop of Akka, Haifa, Nazareth, and All of Galilee, trees also form a central part of the remembered landscape.

Furthermore, trees offer Chacour his key theological metaphor for reconciliation between Palestinians and Israeli Jews and for secure existence for all peoples in the land.

In his first book, *Blood Brothers*, Chacour begins his narration as a six-year-old boy shirking his chores in the field, ensconced in the boughs of a fig tree, his special hideaway as a child. Chacour's elder brother Atallah arrives to tell him that the boys' father, Mikhail, is buying a lamb, news which sets off fevered speculation as to possible reasons for celebration, for typically the family only bartered for a lamb to roast for the Easter celebrations.<sup>21</sup> The remainder of the chapter, told from the perspective of an excited child, has the young Chacour scampering through the village to find his father in order to discover the reason for this unexpected feast.<sup>22</sup> When the father eventually returns home that evening with lamb in tow, he gathers the children to tell them the village will be welcoming Jewish soldiers for up to a week. The lamb, he continues, will be slaughtered in order to welcome the soldiers into the village. The chapter offers only fleeting narrative foreshadowing of Bir'im's fate, as Chacour describes his older brothers sitting "stiffly quiet," his sister's face "a mixture of emotions," the "strange chill mood" which descends when the father tells them that soldiers with guns will be staying in their homes, the "surface calmness" with which Chacour's parents prepare for the soldiers' arrival.<sup>23</sup>

The fig tree in which Chacour begins the chapter was sheltering an innocence about to be shattered, and stands in Chacour's memory as a paradise lost. The soldiers' stay, as Chacour and the reader soon discover, is not brief, and the villagers' hospitable gestures of surrender (perceived by the young Chacour as a celebration) fail to save Bir'im from the fate of nearby villages. The soldiers order the villagers to leave, offering

what turn out to be empty promises that they will be allowed to return. After the family has found shelter in the abandoned homes of refugees from the neighboring village of Jish, Chacour's father and older brothers are rounded up on trucks and forced across the border into the Jordanian-controlled West Bank (only to infiltrate back across the border a few weeks later).<sup>24</sup>

The devastation and loss of the months and years which follow the arrival of the army in the village are encapsulated for Chacour's father (as for the young Chacour) by the loss of the family's fig orchard. Upon hearing that the fig orchard, expropriated along with all of Bir'im's land by the state, had been purchased by a settler as an investment, "Father's face furrowed with grief. I was terrified that he would weep. He was still, his eyes shut, his mustache drooping above a faintly trembling lip. He had planted those fig trees himself one by one, straining with heavy clay jars of water up the steep slopes, caring for each sapling until it was strong enough to survive on its own. They were almost like children to him."<sup>25</sup> After overcoming the initial shock, Mikhail, like many of his fellow villagers, agreed to work as a day laborer in his former orchards:

Father persuaded us that we, the true owners, would care properly for our beautiful trees and keep them safe and healthy for the next year. Foreigners with no relation to the trees would break the branches, take the fruit, and kill the trees. Some of our trees were more than a thousand years old. Chacour forefathers had planted them, tended them, and passed them on to us. Other trees in our village were closer to two thousand years old. People in our generation plant trees for their children's children. It was too much to think of these precious trees being neglected or even destroyed by uncaring strangers.<sup>26</sup>

Mikhail Chacour's insistence that only the "true owners" could properly care for the trees sounds a common theme of Palestinian refugee memory and writing.<sup>27</sup> After three years as a day laborer in the orchards, however, Mikhail quit, finding the experience of becoming a "hewer of wood" and "drawer of water" (Josh. 9:21-27) on his own land

humiliating. “We were becoming slaves,” he told his children, “and our personal dignity, our very soul, was too much to sacrifice. If the trees were destroyed when we returned, Father said, we would plant new ones and begin all over.”<sup>28</sup>

For Mikhail, the geography of *al-‘awdah* (return) was intimately intertwined with Bir‘im’s trees. “Will the government allow us to go back soon?” the aged Mikhail asks his son Elias. “Will they help us rebuild our houses and regain our olive and fig trees? Will I be able to die in Biram where I was born?”<sup>29</sup> Return for Mikhail meant being able to live in a rebuilt Bir‘im: “if my fondest wish could be granted,” he tells Elias, “I would go back to Biram alive and rebuild our house, the house I inherited from my forefathers. I would sit under the fig tree in front of our house, and even if it were for only one day, I would die a happy man.”<sup>30</sup>

For Chacour, as for his father, arboreal and other vegetative metaphors stressing the “rootedness” of Bir‘imites serve to counter Zionism’s ideological portrayals of Palestine as an “empty land” or a “wasteland.”<sup>31</sup> “We were not like some weed newly sprung up after rain,” Chacour insists, “but our spiritual heritage was firmly rooted in the first century.”<sup>32</sup> From his father, Chacour learned that “we should love and respect our Galilean soil, for our people had long struggled to survive here. We were rooted like the poppies and wild, blue irises that thrust up among the rocks. Our family had tilled this land, had worshiped here longer than anyone could remember.”<sup>33</sup> To claim, as Chacour and other Bir‘imites do, that “We belong to the land,” is thus to assert one’s presence in the face of an exclusionary ideology.<sup>34</sup>

However, arboreal claims to rootedness can be and are deployed in the service of nationalist cartographies which envision a homogeneous space in which the nation might

be implanted, even at the violent expense of other peoples. Are the landscapes and maps produced by the Palestinian arboreal imagination simply the mirror of the “flawless Hebrew map” of Zionism, as Israeli analyst Meron Benvenisti suspects, with the Zionist map and the Palestinian map trapped in a zero-sum cartographic battle?<sup>35</sup> Or might visions of the shared rootedness of Palestinians and Israelis in the land spring forth from the arboreal imagination?

One can begin to answer this question by considering the role of trees in efforts led by Chacour and other Bir'imite to press for return. On February 17, 1979 Chacour led a march of Bir'im's children from Jish to the Bir'im site, with marchers carrying olive saplings to plant. The protest coincided with the Jewish holiday of Tu B'Shvat (the Jewish “Arbor Day”), a day on which the Jewish National Fund plants trees bought with donations from the Jewish diaspora. The Israeli military turned the march back, declaring the area to be a closed military zone. In protest, the Committee for the Uprooted of Kafr Bir'im sent the saplings by mail to the Prime Minister's Office and to Knesset members.<sup>36</sup> Such actions admit of at least two interpretations. First, they can be understood in the broader context of Palestinian efforts to affirm their ownership of land and to protect land from state expropriation through the planting of trees. As such, tree planting protests exemplify one form of what Shaul Cohen has called the “politics of planting” in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the ways in which the Israeli state plants trees to control territory (e.g., covering over destroyed Palestinian villages with JNF forests and creating “Green Zones” to inhibit Palestinian building) and by which Palestinians plant trees to bring land into cultivation in order to protect it from Israeli confiscation.<sup>37</sup> A second interpretation, however, is offered by Chacour, who presents the 1979 planting

action as a peace witness. “Children of Biram, are you ready to bring life and peace to your village?” Chacour asked the marchers as they prepared to walk to the village to plant the olive saplings.<sup>38</sup> The two interpretations, to be sure, are not necessarily in conflict, for one can argue that an indispensable element to a robust peace witness is advocacy for secure dwellings for the dispossessed and displaced.

Chacour certainly understood the joint demonstrations of the early 1970s on behalf of Bir‘imite return as witness to a future of peace and reconciliation through justice for displaced refugees. As he surveyed scores of Israeli Jews and Palestinians gathered amidst Bir‘im’s ruins during a six-month long sit-in, Chacour reported that he “felt unearthly, as if I were living in a vision. The hot summer morning stretched into a cool evening, and I rushed about, helping volunteers to settle amid the fallen stones and timbers. The sky darkened, and still a vibrance drove me: voices mixed with laughter; women cooked over blazing wood fires; boys and girls played beneath the olive trees again.”<sup>39</sup> The gathering also stood for Chacour as the fulfillment of a vision he had had of Palestinian-Israeli Jewish reconciliation as a minor seminarian in Haifa in 1952: “An image of Biram resurrected beneath the ancient olive trees, of all the ransacked homes restored and the women safe within. Palestinian and Jew—sipping coffee together again in tranquil conversation.”<sup>40</sup>

To understand Chacour’s theological interpretation of this reconciliation, let us return to the fig tree which captured Chacour’s gaze upon his return to Bir‘im’s ruins in the late sixties. The tree, Chacour remembers, was the product of his father having grafted branches from five different varieties of figs into the trunk of a sixth variety. “Beneath the rough bark where my hand rested, I knew that the living wood had fused

together so perfectly that, should I cut the tree down, I could never see where one variety stopped and the other began.”<sup>41</sup> Standing under his childhood fig tree, Chacour engages in his most sustained biblical exposition and explicit theological analysis. The tree’s grafted branches not only exhibit the practical, historical lesson Chacour learned from his father that Palestinian Arab “lives were bound together with the other people who inhabited Palestine—the Jews. We had suffered together under the Romans, Persians, Crusaders and Turks, and had learned to share the simple elements of human existence—faith, reverence for life, hospitality.”<sup>42</sup> The tree also drives home for Chacour the meaning of Paul’s proclamation that Jew and Gentile have been reconciled through Jesus Christ, the dividing wall between them broken down (Eph. 2:10-20). For Chacour, Paul’s message of reconciliation in Ephesians, in Galatians 3:28-29, and in Romans 9-11, where the grafting metaphor takes center stage, means that “We Gentiles had been ‘grafted in’ among God’s chosen people of faith, just as Father had grafted six different kinds of fig trees together to make a delightful new tree.”<sup>43</sup> Palestinians, including the people of Kafr Bir‘im, may “have been cut off like unwanted branches” by Israeli policies and laws of dispossession and exclusion, but in God’s vision, Chacour discovers, Palestinians and Israeli Jews are intertwined with one another in one body.<sup>44</sup>

Chacour’s appeal to the arboreal imagery of Romans 9-11 necessarily raises the question of whether or not his theology negates ongoing Jewish election, a question which hovers over Paul’s complicated reflections in that epistle. Elsewhere, Chacour addresses Jewish election by bluntly claiming that Jewish chosenness has been replaced by a new vision of election. “We have been taught for centuries that the Jews are the Chosen People of God,” says Chacour. “We do not believe anymore that they are the

Chosen People of God, since now we have a new understanding of the Chosenness. Who is chosen? Man and Woman—every man and every woman—are invited to take part in the divine banquet.”<sup>45</sup> Such a statement, I would argue, fails to do justice to Chacour’s nuance at other points in his writings on the question of election. For example, Chacour’s translation of Romans 9:8 in *Blood Brothers*—“It is not only the natural children who are God’s children, but also the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham’s offspring”—actually mitigates standard translations of that verse, e.g., “it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as descendants” (Rom. 9:8, NRSV).<sup>46</sup> In Chacour’s reading of Romans 9-11, Gentiles are not grafted in at the expense of Jews, a reading which fits well with Paul’s hopeful insistence that the “natural [Jewish] branches” will be “grafted back into” God’s cultivated olive tree alongside grafted-in Gentile branches (11:24).

To be sure, Chacour opposes any theology of election which would underwrite an exclusivist politics, including any form of Zionism tied to the creation and maintenance of homogeneous national space, for such a politics requires the cutting off of Palestinians as unwanted branches. Yet, as Chacour intimates in *Blood Brothers*, without fully developing the insight, a different understanding of election is possible. “God’s true purpose in regathering Israel” in the Hebrew Scriptures, Chacour contends, citing Ezekiel 36:23b, “was to demonstrate to the world that He is holy and He leads a holy nation.” Prophets such as Isaiah insist that God’s deliverance of the people Israel from persecution requires them “to live up to a high calling.”<sup>47</sup> The people Israel’s election is not a matter of pride or boasting, but, properly understood, demands openness to God’s surprising action of incorporating the foreigner and the eunuch into God’s people.<sup>48</sup> For Chacour,

taking his cue from Isaiah 56:1-8, an integral part of God's intention "to hold up His new Israel as a banner of justice before all the nations of the world" is the joining of the "foreigner" to the people Israel: "God's Israel included 'foreigners,' those who were not of the fleshly tribes of Israel, but who had been grafted into his family—just as the branches had been grafted into this fig tree."<sup>49</sup> Chacour certainly affirms Jewish rootedness in the land: "Come, let us be brothers and sisters together in this beautiful land in which all of us have history and roots," he presents his father and fellow Bir'imites saying to Israeli Jews. "There is room enough for all of us. Aren't we the co-persecuted brothers and sisters?"<sup>50</sup> Chacour's theology thus draws on arboreal and other vegetative imagery in the service of a theopolitical vision of common belonging in the land.

For Meron Benvenisti, Palestinian efforts to map their destroyed villages—be they narrative or visual representations of the village landscape, geographical encyclopedias of pre-1948 Palestine, Internet-based mappings of destroyed Palestinian villages using applications such as Google Earth, or atlases which reinscribe the demolished towns onto the map—are interpreted in conflictual terms, as the manifestations a "sacred geography" animated by the battle cry, "I'll destroy your map just as you destroyed mine."<sup>51</sup> Benvenisti thus presents Palestinian cartography as a mirror of Zionist cartography, with both captive to the form of arboreal imagination described by the Psalmist in which the rootedness of one people in the land means the uprooting of others. Thus, on this account, Israeli and Palestinian mappings participate in what Doreen Massey has identified at the attempt of nationalist conceptualizations of space "to fix the meaning of places, to enclose and defend them," to "construct singular,

fixed and static identities for places,” and so to “interpret places as bounded enclosed spaces defined through counterposition against the Other who is outside.” Yet, as Massey continues, such an understanding of space and place is deeply impoverished, failing to attend to the fluid and overlapping character of particular places.<sup>52</sup>

Ibrahim Aburaiya and Efrat Ben-Ze’ev grant that the “Palestine-Israel conflict is often portrayed as a zero-sum game, allowing only two options for the definition and identity of the land—Arab or Jewish, Palestinian or Israeli. . . . Within this abstract context, multiple rendering of space is rarely tolerated.”<sup>53</sup> However, they go on to suggest, alternative cartographies, ones which make room for and embrace heterogeneous spaces, are both possible and an urgent necessity.<sup>54</sup> Bir’imites have constructed such alternative mappings in their proposals to the Israeli government in which a rebuilt Bir’im stands alongside the Israeli communities partially built on the village’s land.<sup>55</sup> The call for refugee return to Kafr Bir’im—or to other destroyed villages inside Israel—thus need not be understood as a call to erase the Israeli Jewish map, but rather can be viewed as a call to draw maps which do justice to the heterogeneous, binational character of Palestine-Israel, to envision spaces in which Palestinians and Israeli Jews alike might sit securely under vine and fig tree (Micah 6:8).

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> For accounts of Kafr Bir’im’s history, its depopulation, and the struggle of Bir’imites to return, see Yūsuf Istifān Sūsān, *Shahādati-Yawmiyyāt bur’imiyyah, 1948-1968* [My Testimony: Bir’im Days, 1948-1968] (n.p.: self-published, 1986); Sharīf Kanā’nah and Muḥammad Ishtayyah, *Al-Qura Al-Filistīniyyah al-Mudammarah* [The Destroyed Palestinian Villages], no. 13 (Bir Zeit: Bir Zeit University Press, 1991). Nihad Boqai, *Returning to Kafr Bir’im* (Bethlehem: BADIL Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights, 2006). Joseph Ryan, S.J., “Refugees within Israel: The Case of the Villagers of Kafr Bir’im and Iqrit,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 2/4 (Summer 1973): 55-81; Ilan Magat, *Bir’am: Kehilat Zikaron Meguyeset*. [Bir’am: A Conscripted Community of Memory and the Maintenance of Voice.] (Giv’at Haviva: ha-Makhon le-heker ha-shalom, 2000); Sarah Ozacky-Lazar, *Ikrit u-Bir’am*. [Ikrit and Bir’am.] (Giv’at Haviva: ha-Makhon le-limudim `Arviyim, 1993).

Three additional notes on orthographic and on terminological matters are in order. First, I use the standard transliteration of Kafr Bir’im; the reader will observe, however, that different authors transliterate the village’s name in a variety of ways. Second, while the State of Israel refers to “Israeli Arabs,” I follow

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the self-designation of the majority of Bir'imites and other Arabs in Israel as Palestinian citizens of Israel. Finally, I routinely refer to "Israeli Jews" instead of simply "Israelis" or "Jews" in order to underscore that not all citizens of Israel are Jews, an important fact to underscore given that the State of Israel does not recognize an Israeli nationality, but rather a Jewish nationality alongside 136 other possible "national" classifications, e.g., "Arab," "Druze," "Samaritan," etc.

<sup>2</sup> The number of Palestinian towns and villages depopulated and destroyed by Israeli forces during and after 1948 ranges between 413 and 531, depending in part on what one classifies as a separate population center. For the lower figure, see Walid Khalidi, ed., *All that Remains: The Palestinian Villages Occupied and Depopulated by Israel in 1948* (Washington, DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1992); the higher figure can be found in Salman Abu-Sitta, *The Palestinian Nakba, 1948: The Register of Depopulated Localities in Palestine* (London: The Palestinian Return Centre, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Elias Chacour, with David Hazard, *Blood Brothers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Chosen Books, 2003), 144.

<sup>4</sup> Ghazi Falah, "The 1948 Israeli-Palestinian War and its Aftermath: The Transformation and De-Signification of Palestine's Cultural Landscape," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 86/2 (June 1996): 256-285.

<sup>5</sup> "The planted forest asserts Jewish presence, implicitly both past and present," Bardenstein claims, "and simultaneously effaces Palestinian memory of the site." Carol B. Bardenstein, "Threads of Memory and Discourses of Rootedness: Of Trees, Oranges, and the Prickly-Pear Cactus in Israel/Palestine," *Edebiyat* 8/1 (March 1998), 9.

<sup>6</sup> For a critical analysis of the JNF, see Walter Lehn and Uri Davis, *The Jewish National Fund* (London and New York: Kegan Paul, 1988). Bir'imites exiled in Jish reacted with shock and concern upon finding "employees of the Keren Kayemet surveying our land in the same way as the abandoned neighbour-villages." "The activities of the Keren Kayemet are causing confusion while we are trying to rest assured based on your promises that we will return to our village as soon as the temporary military need comes to an end," the village elders protested in an April 29, 1949 cable sent to the Israeli Minister of Minorities and the Military Governor for the Eastern Galilee. "We hope that this time will arrive very soon." The villagers correctly suspected that such surveying represented the first step to the land's expropriation and its being turned over to Jewish development. Indeed, Kibbutz Baram occupied Bir'im's land on June 5, 1949. See Sūsān , 49, 18.

<sup>7</sup> See Naama Meishar, "Fragile Guardians: Nature Reserves and Forests Facing Arab Villages," in *Constructing a Sense of Place: Architecture and the Zionist Discourse*, ed. Haim Yacobi (Aldershot, England and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), 303-325.

<sup>8</sup> In 1965, the State of Israel created Baram National Park and the Baram Oaks Nature Reserve on Bir'im and its land. For a list of destroyed Palestinian villages over which Israeli national parks and nature reserves have been established, see Noga Kadman, *Erased from Space and Consciousness: Depopulated Palestinian Villages in the Israeli-Zionist Discourse* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: November Books, 2008), 140-168.

<sup>9</sup> The sign reads: "Baram National Park also contains the ruins of the Maronite village of Biram. In 1948, the Israel Defense Forces ordered the residents to abandon their homes for security reasons. The church remained intact and now is the spiritual center of the members of the Maronite community." [http://www.parks.org.il/ParksENG/company\\_card.php3?CNumber=335816#data](http://www.parks.org.il/ParksENG/company_card.php3?CNumber=335816#data). The new sign, while admitting that the park is located over a Maronite village, obfuscates by invoking "security" as the rationale for the villagers being ordered to leave, a claim which removes Bir'im's depopulation from the wider context of the depopulation and destruction of hundreds of Palestinian villages in 1948 and 1948. The sign also neglects to mention that Bir'imites continue to demand to return to the village.

<sup>10</sup> For an overview of the number of Palestinian refugees worldwide, see the *Survey of Palestinian Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons, 2006-2007* (Bethlehem: BADIL Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights, 2007). The survey also delineates the distinction between refugees and internally displaced persons. Both have been uprooted, but internally displaced persons have remained within their home country. Thus, persons from Kafr Bir'im who ended up in Lebanon are considered to be refugees under international law, whereas Bir'imites now in Israeli towns and villages like Jish, Akka, and Nazareth are classified as internally displaced persons.

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<sup>11</sup> Carol Bardenstein, "Trees, Forests, and the Shaping of Palestinian and Israeli Collective Memory," in *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, ed. Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer (Hanover, NH and London: University Press of New England, 1999), 166.

<sup>12</sup> Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations* no. 26 (Spring 1989), 9.

<sup>13</sup> Bardenstein, "Threads of Memory," 10. Efrat Ben-Ze'ev concurs, observing that "Fruit trees for the *fallahin* (the peasants) signify their land, be it the garden surrounding home (*al-hakura*) or the trees of one's distant plots." Efrat Ben-Ze'ev, "The Politics of Taste and Smell: Palestinian Rites of Return," in *The Politics of Food*, ed. Marianne Elisabeth Lien and Brigitte Nerlich (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2004), 148.

<sup>14</sup> Ben-Ze'ev, 155.

<sup>15</sup> Efrat Ben-Ze'ev and Ibrahim Aburayya, "'Middle-Ground' Politics and the Re-Palestinianization of Places in Israel," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 36 (2004): 648. While Bir'imites were the first to hold such summer camps, other groups of internally displaced Palestinians in Israel have since developed similar programs.

<sup>16</sup> Magat, 49.

<sup>17</sup> Boqai, 86.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>19</sup> For video of Chacour reciting this poem, see <http://palestineremembered.com/Safad/Kafr-Bir'im/Story9903.html>. Accessed August 21, 2008.

<sup>20</sup> "Oh ancient oak tree/You are the living witness/And your ground the true document/Under the shade of your branches we have been nurtured./Tell the truth to the invader./Go and tell the occupier . . . /This homeland is ours and the truth/Shall not be concealed." All quotations from Ibrahim Issa are taken from John Halaka, *The Presence of Absence in the Ruins of Kafr Bir'im*, 1 DVD (60 minutes) videorecording (San Diego: Sitting Crow Productions 2007).

<sup>21</sup> In *Blood Brothers*, Chacour uses the Anglicized version of his father's name, Michael, whereas in Elias Chacour, *We Belong to the Land: The Story of a Palestinian Israeli Who Lives for Peace and Reconciliation*, with Mary E. Jensen (Notre Dame, IN.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), he employs the more faithful transliteration, Mikhail.

<sup>22</sup> Chacour, *Blood Brothers*, chapter 1, "News in the Wind," 19-30

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 28-29.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 67-68.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>26</sup> Chacour, *We Belong to the Land*, 79. In more than one place in *Blood Brothers* and *We Belong to the Land*, Chacour describes the antiquity of Kafr Bir'im and his family's presence in the village in ways which, if interpreted in literalistic terms, run up against the historical record. Thus, for example, any thousand-year-old olive trees in Kafr Bir'im would not have been planted by the ancestors of contemporary Bir'imites, for the village's founding, Palestinian sources report, dates back 600 to 700 years. Furthermore, Chacour's family, one of the two Greek Catholic families in the predominantly Maronite Christian village, came to Kafr Bir'im in the 18<sup>th</sup> century from the village of Hurfeish, and so would not have planted thousand-year-old trees in Kafr Bir'im; that said, the families in Kafr Bir'im intermarried, and so Chacour could certainly have ancestors from the founding of the village. Another account in *We Belong to the Land*, in which Chacour, asked by an Israeli security official at the airport how many generations his family goes back in Bir'im, tells of one of his forefathers welcoming the "stranger" Abraham to the village, also cannot be interpreted in literalistic terms. For background on the Chacour family's presence in Kafr Bir'im, see Kanā'nah and Ishtayyah, 10 and Ibrahim Issa in Halaka, *The Presence of Absence*. Such passages, however, are not, I would suggest, meant to be interpreted in a baldly literal fashion, but instead represent assertions of rootedness in the face of a Zionist ideology which deploys claims of antiquity in the land in order to justify its acts of colonization and dispossession. Such assertions participate in the broader dynamic within the mythos of Palestinian nationalism of claiming roots in antiquity, e.g., "Canaanite" progenitors, which pre-date Jewish presence in the land. One implication of this paper's argument is that instead of adjudicating between competing discourses of indigeneity and autochthony, in which one people's antiquity in the land can be used to exclude or dispossess another people, the theological challenge is to articulate a vision in which all of God's children are "rooted" in the land. Chacour, I argue, is a

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proponent of such a vision; his appeals to ancient roots are not deployed to serve a cause of dispossession or exclusion but to insist on his rightful place in the land.

<sup>27</sup> Carol Bardenstein explains that “The notion of the land and its trees remaining ‘loyal’ (i.e., healthy, alive, and fruitful) only to its ‘rightful’ tenders, and shriveling up as if in protest when tended to by strangers is a recurring theme in Palestinian writing.” Bardenstein, “Threads of Memory,” 19.

<sup>28</sup> Chacour, *We Belong to the Land*, 79.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>32</sup> Chacour, *Blood Brothers*, 39.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>34</sup> “Mobile Western people have difficulty comprehending the significance of the land for Palestinians. We belong to the land. We identify with the land, which has been treasured, cultivated, and nurtured by countless generations of ancestors. . . . The land is so holy, so sacred, to us because we have given it our sweat and blood.” Chacour, *We Belong to the Land*, 80.

<sup>35</sup> Meron Benvenisti, *Sacred Landscape: The Buried History of the Holy Land since 1948*, trans. Maxine Kaufman-Lacusta (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 43.

<sup>36</sup> Chacour, *We Belong to the Land*, 114-117.

<sup>37</sup> Shaul Ephraim Cohen, *The Politics of Planting: Israeli-Palestinian Competition for Control of Land in the Jerusalem Periphery*, University of Chicago Geography Research Paper No. 236 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

<sup>38</sup> Chacour, *We Belong to the Land*, 114.

<sup>39</sup> Chacour, *Blood Brothers*, 193.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 94-95.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>45</sup> Chacour, “Reconciliation and Justice: Living with the Memory,” in *Holy Land—Hollow Jubilee: God, Justice, and the Palestinians*, ed. Naim Ateek and Michael Prior (London: Melisende, 1999), 112.

<sup>46</sup> Chacour, *Blood Brothers*, 145.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>48</sup> Chacour points in this direction when he claims that through Isaiah “God was requiring a true change of heart in the Jewish people, a change in their traditional exclusiveness which caused them to believe that they alone were God’s favored ones. All the prophets had made it clear that such thinking led to pride and error and wrongdoing.” Chacour, *Blood Brothers*, 149. Chacour’s argument, unfortunately, is marred by the phrase “traditional exclusiveness,” which falls into the rhetorical trap of contrasting “traditional” Jewish “exclusiveness” with the “inclusiveness” of Christianity. The substantive point which can be recovered from Chacour’s claim, I believe, is that when election becomes a matter of boasting or self-congratulation, God’s people loses sight of the task of living as a paradigm nation in the land, instead engaging in the exclusivist politics practiced by nations the world over.

<sup>49</sup> Chacour, *Blood Brothers*, 149-150.

<sup>50</sup> Chacour, *We Belong to the Land*, 68.

<sup>51</sup> Benvenisti, 43. Examples of the diverse forms of Palestinian mapping of the destruction of 1948 and of potential refugee return include: Walid Khalidi’s edited encyclopedia of destroyed Palestinian villages, *All That Remains: The Palestinian Villages Occupied and Depopulated by Israel in 1948* (Washington, DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1992); Salman Abu-Sitta’s works mapping Palestinian geography prior to 1948 and the sites of destroyed villages onto contemporary Israeli road maps, such as *Atlas of Palestine, 1948* (London: Palestine Land Society, 2005) and *Ṭarīq al-‘awdah: dalīl al-mudun wa al-qurā al-muhajjirah wa al-ḥāliyyah wa al-amākin al-muqadasah fī filištīn* [The Road to Return: Guide to Destroyed and Remaining Villages and Holy Places in Palestine] (London: Palestine Land Society, 2007); and the Google Earth mappings of destroyed Palestinian villages and other Palestinian sites (e.g., saint shrines and Arabic names of natural features like springs) found on an Internet portal such as Palestine Remembered (<http://www.palestineremembered.com/>).

<sup>52</sup> Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 168.

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<sup>53</sup> Ben-Ze'ev and Aburaiya, 651.

<sup>54</sup> Aburaiya and Ben-Ze'ev insist that "as time goes by, other maps—multiple maps for each space—continuously emerge. The imaginary maps that would not necessarily run long ethnic lines might hold the secret for a more tranquil future in Israel/Palestine" (Ibid.).

<sup>55</sup> The Committee for the Uprooted of Kafr Bir'im (CUB) has identified the following principles as integral to a just resolution of their claims:

\*The recognition of the ownership of our land, as well as our right to return to it and to our homes, and the recognition of all that this process entails.

\*We are not claiming back, to our use, the portion of our land used by the settlements.

\*We wish to live in peace, harmony and co-operation with the inhabitants of the settlements in the area.

See <http://www.birem.org/arabic/index.htm>. Accessed October 8, 2008. In February of 1995, the Committee submitted a statement to the Liba'i Commission, appointed by the Israeli government to resolve the cases of Kafr Bir'im and the Greek Catholic village of Iqrit, which detailed these principles further:

1. Property rights of the people of Kafr Bir'im will be restored as they were before 1948;
2. Kafr Bir'im landowners will not demand use of the built-up areas and the agricultural land currently used by *Kibbutz Bar'am* and *Moshav Dovev*;
3. The return of the Kafr Bir'im displaced will not lead to the displacement of the Jewish residents of *Kibbutz Bar'am* and *Moshav Dovev*;
4. All land currently used by *Kibbutz Bar'am* for grazing will be returned for use by the owners of Kafr Bir'im;
5. All former inhabitants of Kafr Bir'im and their descendants can return to the village. The village will be rebuilt on the site of the original village which will be expanded, and land currently allocated for forests and the national park will be re-allocated.

See Boqai, 75. An architect, Deeb Maron, and an artist, Hannah Farah, both self-identified Bir'imites, have created architectural models for a rebuilt Bir'im based on these principles. See Boqai, 104-106.

The CUB's principles are also reflected in a 2004 joint statement formulated by internally displaced Bir'imites and members of *Kibbutz Baram* who participated in workshops led by facilitators from the Zochrot Association, an Israeli organization dedicated to "remembering the *Nakba* in Hebrew." After several sessions of facilitated meetings, the kibbutz residents and the Bir'imites agreed that "With great sorrow for the injustice done in 1948, throughout the military regime and until today, we wish to tell the story of what happened and act for the return of the displaced people of Bir'im and their descendants to their village." The group then delineated specific principles to guide the practical implementation of future return:

1. Kafr Bir'im will be re-established on the land and forest not currently cultivated by *Kibbutz Bar'am*, *Kibbutz Sasa*, and *Moshav Dovev*;
2. Land built-up and cultivated by the kibbutzim will not be returned to the original owners, unless the members of the kibbutzim agree otherwise;
3. Palestinian owners of the above land will be compensated;
4. Kafr Bir'im displaced who choose not to return will also be compensated;
5. Kafr Bir'im displaced who live in exile are considered rights-holders just like those present in the country as internally displaced;
6. All members of the group, Kafr Bir'im displaced and members of *Kibbutz Bar'am*, will work together in order to prevent further confiscation of land

To be sure, the members of *Kibbutz Baram* in the group which produced this joint statement did not represent the dominant perspective on the kibbutz. However, that some kibbutzniks could envision a place for a rebuilt Kafr Bir'im on land it now uses, and that Bir'imites could accept a place for the kibbutz on the land they once held, shows that mappings of return are not necessarily acts of cartographic erasure and that cartographies are possible which incorporate both Palestinian and Israeli Jewish space. See Boqai, 80.