Inventing a Past, Destroying the Present  
The Village of Silwan

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Summary

I will start with a few background facts that most of you will know very well. Archaeology in the State of Israel is divided. On the one hand there are archaeologists in some Israeli universities who have discovered that the Jewish myth of its history is in fact wrong; that the Israelites never went to Egypt, never came across the desert and conquered the land of Canaan, and that they never had a kingdom ruled by David and Solomon. They were of local origin and formed into two separate kingdoms. These archaeologists doubt that there ever was a unified kingdom of Israel and Judah occupying Palestine and indeed that there is no archaeological evidence of the existence of David and Solomon. One interesting consequence of this, incidentally, is that Jerusalem never was an Israelite city, but only a Judean one.

These archaeologists are trying to write a scientific history and some of them try to explain to their fellow-Jews that they must learn the true facts and take account of them. But they are opposed by a second group of archaeologists who work for rich and powerful Zionist patrons, whose work is funded only to find evidence of the mythical past—palaces of King David, or Solomon’s copper mines in Jordan. These archaeologists attract most of the attention in the media. Their work is often bad, but they are paid well for it. And of course they also have the support
of the State of Israel which does not intend the facts of history to interfere with its policy of Judaizing Palestine.

One of the worst examples of ideologically-driven, careless, destructive archaeology is taking place on the slopes of the Wadi Joz south-east of the old city of Jerusalem, opposite the mount of Olives. It centres on the village of Silwan. The hill on which the village stands is known as the Ophel, and it contains the remains of the oldest city of Jerusalem, beginning in about the year 2000 BCE, when the Canaanites built a small but powerful city. That city lasted until at least the 14th century, when its king sent letters to the king of Egypt in Tell-el-Amarna. Israelis now call this hill the 'City of David', in the mistaken belief that David was its builder. David of course, if he existed, did not found this city. A Judean city was rebuilt on the Ophel hill, but after the Jews were expelled from the city by the Roman emperor Hadrian in 135 CE it lay outside the new Roman city, which included more or less the area of the present Old City.

The Palestinians of Silwan, account for about 90 per cent of the residents of this area, but they are under attack from a growing number of Jewish settlers who are supported by the State of Israel. The area has been designated by Israel as an archaeological park. But in charge of the park is a private Jewish settler organization calling itself El‘ad (in Hebrew ‘to the City of David’). This organization began, and remains, essentially committed to the settlement of Jews in Jerusalem, by ‘acquiring’ houses through various illegal means. It has stated publicly that it believes the entire hill should be occupied only by Jews. In 1992 it successfully lobbied for a contract from the Israel Nature and Parks Authority to manage the archaeological park with the exclusive right to conduct excavations and undertake
reconstruction. This work is used by El’ad to continue its main aim of Jewish settlement. Its publicity ignores completely all non-Jewish occupation, and its archaeological work is confined to a very short period, namely the Iron Age, from 1200–400 BCE – that is, it 20% of the city’s past. El’ad describes the site as ‘holy’, not because of any religious significance it has but because El’ad regards Jewish history itself as ‘holy’. Like many Jewish settlers, this organization makes a religion out of its own history and invites visitors to the ‘park’ to worship that history.

El’ad deliberately conducts its archaeological excavations in a way that makes life for the residents difficult and sometimes impossible, undermining their houses, blocking the streets, altering the landscape, and making every effort to make them leave. In Silwan, Zionist archaeology is being used not only to distort and misrepresent the past but to destroy the present and create a different future.

How and why has the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) handed over responsibility for archaeology in this area to this organization? As I understand the situation, the IAA has given Elad the right to oversee the excavations in the areas under the umbrella of ‘rescue excavations’, which require no regular permit and no regular oversight from either the IAA or its academic advisory board that normally screens all applications for licensing. This means that the archaeologists working in the field report to the Elad management and publish within their mechanisms or outlets. It is virtually independent of all political control or responsibility, even though it is carrying out the policy of the State of Israel.

El’ad is one of Israel’s wealthiest organizations in Israel. According to its 2008 financial statements, its assets totaled 104
million Israeli shekels (about 25 million dollars). This is made up mostly of donations (94 million shekels). The Israeli Registrar of nonprofit organizations has allowed El’ad to keep secret its list of donors, but we can guess that most of these come from Zionist donors and from Christian evangelical groups in the USA, and from Russian Jewish billionaires. The remaining 10 million shekels come mainly from the City of David tourism site and a grant from the Education Ministry of between 500,000 and 1 million shekels a year. The tourist center in the City of David and all that is within it is also run and administered by Elad and not by the IAA, not by the National Parks Authority, not by the municipality of Jerusalem, and the IAA takes in a huge sum of money as a result of having agreed to these conditions. The archaeologists working in the areas are handsomely remunerated, some of them collecting second and third salaries.

That is not all. Security at El’ad’s properties is funded by the Housing and Construction Ministry, which hires a private security firm for this purpose. Since these assets sprawl over a wide area, including the Old City, this security work is complicated and expensive: in 2010, the sum of 54 million shekels was allocated to protect Jewish settlers in East Jerusalem neighbourhoods. This includes security cameras and fences that separate the settlers from the Palestinian residents. Furthermore, The Education Ministry has ruled that each school pupil should visit Jerusalem three times, and so this archaeological park has been saturated with schoolchildren. The Israel Defence Forces also send soldiers to the site for Jewish heritage tours.

El’ad is part of a larger picture, too. An associated organization called ‘Ateret Cohanim has settled more than 1,000 Jews in the Old City, reportedly owning more than 70 buildings
in the Muslim Quarter, worth an estimated $10 million. Ateret Cohanim officials have stated that they wish to buy the rest of the buildings in the Muslim Quarter at a cost of $100 million, with another $100 million for renovations. Ateret Cohanim also has control of no fewer than seven further organizations that are not officially registered in Israel. Some of these are registered in overseas tax shelters. The village of Silwan is effectively run by a private organization, that is itself part of a larger network of private organizations, doing the Israeli government’s work of replacing Palestinian residents with Jewish settlers and removing all traces of non-Jewish presence. After 24 years of Jewish settlement in this area, the number of Jews still does not exceed 10% percent of the total population, though El’ad members claim that they control most of the land and constitute half the residents. But obviously the figure is rising.

Is there any way in which the process can be stopped? It is difficult since, as we have seen in recent months, even the President of the United States is unable, or unwilling to stop the process of building on stolen land in Jerusalem. Hence other means have to be found. There has been a great deal of brave opposition from the residents of Silwan, resulting in police action, including arrest and expulsion of village leaders. The village’s Information Center director Jawad Siyam was arrested recently for resisting and remained under house arrest until his recent release. Last September Samir Sarhan was shot by the local security guards. But how much help are these threatened residents receiving from the outside world? Pictures and details of the struggle can be seen on many internet sites, but they are not well-known in the West where many people do not care.
The work of El’ad has been condemned by many international bodies. The UN has called the plan for this area ‘illegal’ and ‘unhelpful to peace efforts’. Activists from the neighborhood of Silwan sent a letter last month to European Union consuls in the city asking them for protection against Israel actions in the area. The letter followed the publication of a report compiled by heads of European diplomatic missions in Jerusalem and Ramallah in which they concluded that East Jerusalem should be treated as the capital of a Palestinian state, and included several other recommendations to the European Union regarding its attitude toward East Jerusalem. The European diplomats, mainly consuls, also recommended that European Union officials and politicians refuse to visit Israeli government offices located beyond the UN recognized borders of the State of Israel, and that they decline any Israeli security in the Old City and elsewhere in East Jerusalem. Various international groups such as ‘Architects & Planners for Justice in Palestine’ are also campaigning against the abuses of the State of Israel, specifically including Silwan.

There is protest within Israeli society too. The High Court has ruled against the activities of El’ad, but with no effect. The chairman of the board of the Israel Antiquities Authority, Benjamin Kedar, has stated that Elad is ‘an organization with a declared ideological agenda, which presents the history of the City of David in a biased way’ and several other Israeli and Jewish archaeologists have denounced what is happening. In 1998 a number of Israeli archeologists from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem filed a suit against Elad’s monopoly on digging in the Silwan basin. The High Court ruled that the authorities needed to hand over the management of the
archaeological park to a neutral party. Ten years later the status quo remains the same.

Apart from the efforts of the villagers, the only other practical step has been the creation of a group dedicated to an alternative presentation of the Silwan area. On the front page of their website is a quotation from the novel 1984 by the British writer George Orwell: *Who controls the past, controls the future; who controls the present, controls the past.* This very well sums up what is happening in Silwan, where the past is being controlled through abuse of archaeology, used to change the future. The website includes a petition that anyone visiting their site is invited to sign; it also advertises lectures and tours, and presents up-to-date information on what is happening in Silwan. The group focuses its attention, however, on the abuse of archaeology and Judaizing of the past, and does not directly challenge the larger policy of Judaizing the city of Jerusalem.

Meanwhile, outside the Middle East, the international and western media are so fixated with the Bible and archaeology in a naïve way. They report every artifact discovered in Israel with a biblical connection, and El'ad has exploited this situation to its benefit. The public’s view of the past is largely shaped or manipulated either by film studios or publishing houses, newspapers or by groups posing as scientific enterprises such as Elad. Archaeologists have allowed their discipline to be taken over by non-qualified individuals looking to sell the past and how that past is perceived and remembered today. But of course this is only part of the problem. Distorting the past is bad enough, but using that distortion as part of a policy of illegal colonizing is another. This is a scandal that all historians and archaeologists in the world should be fighting.