This article reviews the deployment of archaeological narratives within the context of broader nationalist narratives in Israel and Palestine. It closely examines the overlapping and intertwined rhetorics of Zionism, Palestinian nationalism, religion, history and archaeology in Israel and the West Bank. The study focuses on the city of Nablus and discusses: the archaeological record of the city, primarily of the excavation of Tel Balata, biblical Shechem; other, non-archaeological sites in the area associated with biblical narratives; and the manner in which competing narratives borrow, reject, adopt, adapt, and otherwise transform themselves on account of their close relationship to materials within the city. Based on this examination, the author calls for an increased awareness of the political ramifications of archaeological practice in Israel and the West Bank. The author proposes that archaeologists working there need to expand the time periods they work on in order to write a fuller narrative of the history of the region and to de-privilege biblical narratives and history as the driving force behind excavation.
This paper could well be called “Who’s buried in Joseph’s Tomb?” The tomb, well known to those who follow the political situation in Israel and the West Bank, operates as a figural and literal locus of conflict between Palestinians and Israelis in the city of Nablus. The abandonment and subsequent burning of the tomb and its attendant compound during the early days the renewed Intifada in October, 2000 did not come as a great shock to those familiar with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, the on-going conflicts over religious sites such as Joseph’s Tomb appear to have little to do with archaeology, beyond perhaps logistical difficulties created by the unstable political environment. To the contrary, conflicts like that over Joseph’s Tomb go to the heart of the analytical and interpretive project of archaeologists working in Israel-Palestine. In this paper I trace the links between archaeological and nationalist narratives, an important, rhetorical element in the ongoing violent conflict in the region, as well as suggest some ways in which archaeologists may begin to work beyond the current narrative and discursive boundaries that limit not only what they may say, but even the projects in which they engage.

Narrative is a key mean through which to understand the relationship between nationalism and archaeology in Israel-Palestine. Historians recognize the important role that narrative structure plays in writing history (White 1973). It is no less important for archaeological narratives (Hodder et al., 1995; Shanks 1992). Additionally, scholars do

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1 This paper was originally written in the fall of 2000, at the start of the new Intifada. At that time, I did not foresee how prolonged and violent the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would become. I have not updated the text of the paper to reflect the new situation – my writing has been outpaced by events in the region. The situation in Nablus and its nearby refugee camps continues to worsen. This paper has an optimistic view of what archaeology can accomplish. However, archaeology can achieve nothing if basic human rights are not first respected.
not produce historical narratives in a vacuum of other (political, popular, contemporary, or academic) narratives. What I argue in this paper is that the narratives that archaeologists produce draw on nationalist narrative themes from outside of academic archaeology and also that archaeological narratives then feed back into a wider cultural world. This argument is not new – archaeologists have recognized that their work has substantial and important ties to the world beyond academia for over fifteen years (Hodder 1986; Shanks and Tilley 1987; Meskell 1998). However, the case of biblical archaeology in Israel and Palestine highlights the violent and destructive forces that can mobilize narrative themes produced by archaeologists and also the dangers inherent in biblical archaeology on account of a historical tendency to privilege narratives associated with Jews and Israelis over those of the Palestinians.

The political and nationalist overtones of Israeli archaeology have long been recognized (Silberman 1982, 1989; Zerubavel 1995: 59; El-Haj 1998; Meskell 1998). In her book Recovered Roots, Yael Zerubavel emphasizes the role that archaeology played in shoring up the fiction of modern Israeli identity, reinforcing the claims of the state of Israel to the land and by creating a fictive continuity between modern Israel and ancient Israel through large, government sponsored excavation projects: “Archaeology thus becomes a national tool through which Israelis can recover their roots in the ancient past and the ancient homeland. To participate in the archaeological excavation ... is to perform a patriotic act of bridging Exile to reestablish the connection with the national past and authenticate national memory” (Zerubavel 1995: 59). Zerubavel cites the examples of the massive Masada excavations conducted by Yigael Yadin in 1962-63 and also the discovery of archaeological material in the caves of Nahal Hever. Both sites contain
remains from the first and second Jewish revolts against the Roman Empire, respectively. These sites were important to early Zionist and Israeli leaders because, “The revolts against the Roman domination of Judaea symbolized the continuing zest of the national spirit and the uncompromising drive to achieve national freedom that the Zionist settlers wished to revive in the modern period” (Zerubavel 1995: 215). The narratives produced by the excavations at Masada and at Nahal Hever\(^2\) fed into what Zerubavel (1995: 214) refers to as the “master commemorative narrative that highlights their members’ common past and legitimizes their aspiration for a shared destiny.”

Masada\(^3\) may be the most obvious interface of archaeological and political / nationalist narratives, but it is by no means the only one. Archaeological excavations at a number of other sites also demonstrate the relationship between archaeological and nationalist narratives. I argue that it is not just sites but the narratives of archaeology generally that have been selectively co-opted by the Israeli government in order to strengthen its claims to the land (El-Haj 1998: 166-167, 180). An important part of their claim is their origin in the land, as having been there first. The Torah, read as the history of the Jewish people, narrates the wanderings of the Patriarchs, the promise of the land of Canaan to Abraham, the enslavement in and flight from Egypt, the reception of the Law,

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\(^2\) Both of these sites were excavated by Yigael Yadin, one of the leading members of the first generation of Israeli archaeologists. Zerubavel contends that it is no mistake that Yadin, the retired army general, got involved in archaeology, or that the excavation of his major sites was carried out with the help and under the protection of the Israeli army.

\(^3\) Masada is a spectacular, mountain-top, Hellenistic-Roman fortress site in the Judean desert, not far from the Dead Sea. The site is famous both for the elaborate palace built there by Herod the Great in the first century B.C.E. and especially for the story of mass suicide recounted by the Jewish historian Josephus’s in *The Jewish War*. During the Jewish revolt against Rome in 67-73 C.E., a group of rebels killed the Roman garrison at Masada and took over the defensive site for themselves. After the sack of Jerusalem in 70 C.E., the Roman governor turned his attention to the last few pockets of Jewish resistance. In 73 C.E., two Roman legions and many auxiliary troops surrounded the mountain-top site. The Jewish rebels fought until it became clear that the Roman soldiers would successfully overcome the site’s defenses and take the defenders. Instead of allowing themselves to be defeated, the Jewish defenders killed their wives, children and each other, until only one man remained, who killed himself. Thus, when the Romans stormed the top of the mountain, there was no one alive to capture and enslave.
and finally the conquest / settlement of the Promised Land. The archaeological record is used to corroborate this narrative, which in turn drives much archaeological investigation. The Iron Age, the period most associated with the biblical narratives, is currently the most studied period of the archaeological record in Israel / Palestine. The foundational narrative of the State of Israel, backed by archaeology, is then used to justify the seizing and holding of land, not just by the Israeli government, but most often by settler groups.

The wider implications for the relationship between archaeological and nationalist narratives are demonstrated by the situation in Nablus – biblical Shechem – home to around 75,000 Palestinians, the Jewish settlement of Elon Moreh, and Joseph’s Tomb. The city of Nablus lies an hour north of Jerusalem. The largest city in the West Bank after Jerusalem, Nablus houses many offices of the Palestinian Authority and is the location of the PA’s jail. The city is nestled between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim, the latter the sacred mountain of the dwindling Samaritan population which still lives on its slopes. In the western part of the city, not far off the main road that runs into town from Jerusalem, are the site of biblical Shechem (Tel Balata), the Greek Orthodox convent at Jacob’s Well, and Joseph’s Tomb. The remains of a Roman temple are on the flanks of Mount Gerizim, and the remains of Sebastiya, Roman Samaria, lie just a few miles to the north. The city is steeped with history and is situated in a densely storied landscape. The proximity of so many ancient sites on the landscape is part of what makes it so easy to slide between narratives of the past and present. In addition, the remains of the past visible today have a strong role to play in the interactions of people in the city. Competing claims that groups make to various monuments and the exclusionary ownership that typically accompanies such a claim are the source of much of the violence
between Palestinians and Israelis in the city. The claims are validated in part by drawing on the four basic narrative strands I lay out below and in part through armed conflict.

BIBLICAL NARRATIVES

The biblical narratives are not about Nablus, but rather about Shechem, whose remains now lay within the modern city of Nablus. Shechem plays an important role in several places in the book of Genesis and in the books of conquest: Joshua, Chronicles, and Kings. Jacob settled near the city with his young family in Genesis 34. The city is mentioned again in Joshua, first as the place where the Israelites renew their covenant with God, then as the burial place of Joseph.

> And Joseph’s bones, which the Israelites had brought up from Egypt, were buried at Shechem in the tract of land that Jacob bought for a hundred pieces of silver from the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem. This became the inheritance of Joseph’s descendants. (Joshua 24:32, NIV, emphasis added)

Shechem was an important place for the authors of the Hebrew Bible. Its frequent mention and its recognition as the place where Joshua renewed the Mosaic covenant with the people of Israel both attest to its significance. The biblical narratives also establish the city ideologically as an integral part of Israel’s inheritance. These passages are quoted on the website[^1] of a contemporary Jewish settlement near Nablus, rhetorically establishing the settlement’s right to exist. We are told that Joseph’s bones were saved and brought out of Egypt by his fleeing descendants in order that they might be buried in the tract of land purchased by his father from the local populous. The elements of rightful ownership,

[^1]: [http://www.shechem.org/elon-moreh/eindex.html](http://www.shechem.org/elon-moreh/eindex.html)
inheritance, and an unrelated surrounded population recur in other of the narratives about Nablus / Shechem.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL NARRATIVES

The archaeological narratives about Nablus focus on a narrow time period, leaving out a significant part of the archaeological record of the area (Wright 1965). Archaeology in Israel-Palestine\(^5\) grew primarily out of questions raised in biblical studies and fieldwork conducted on the model used by such figures as Flinders Petrie and Sir Arthur Evans. The earliest excavations in the Near East were conducted by archaeologists trained in other regions. Tell el-Hesi in southern Israeli was the first site extensively excavated using a scientific methodology, begun by Flinders Petrie under the aegis of the Palestine Exploration Fund in 1890 and continued by Fredrick Jones Bliss in 1891-93 (Silberman 1982: 149-154). Regional specialists in Levantine archaeology, concentrating on the Bronze and Iron Ages, soon developed into a distinctive and isolated sub-field of archaeology. From these earliest investigators, Levantine and biblical archaeology was dominated by archaeologists trained in seminaries, reading ancient Semitic languages, focused on what were supposed to be the biblical and pre-biblical periods. The Bible was taken as the foundational text for all investigations of the past. Anything more recent than the time of the life of Jesus received little scholarly attention. The Iron Age, 1200 BCE to 586 BCE (the period of the biblical patriarchs through the date of the destruction of the First, Solomonic Temple), received and continues to receive by far the greatest amount of archaeological attention. In order to understand which periods of the archaeological

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\(^5\) This history of archaeology in Israel-Palestine is meant to illustrate the pervasive narrative elements of archaeological work undertaken in the area and is not meant to be a comprehensive history of the subject. For a more extensive discussion of the history of Israeli-Palestinian archaeology and its relationship to nationalism, see Silberman (1982, 1997), El-Haj (1998), and Zerubavel (1996).
record excavators are currently concentrating on, I undertook a quick survey of the volunteer sites listed in *Biblical Archaeology Review* over the last five years. The breakdown of what periods listed themselves as concentrating on demonstrates the continuing emphasis of excavations: Paleolithic – 2%; Neolithic – 3%; Chalcolithic – 6%; Bronze Age – 28%; Iron Age – 46%; Hellenistic – 2%; Roman – 39%; Byzantine – 2%; Islamic – 0%; Crusader – 2%.  

In addition to Zionist narratives, discussed below, ideas about the past in Israel / Palestine during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries either were formed in a vacuum of ideas about historical preservation, under the Ottomans, or were constituted by a distant bureaucracy in another country with a different history and a different set of priorities for a different set of monuments, under the British Mandate. After the beginning of the Mandate in 1920, sites were considered for protection as antiquity sites if they dated to before 1700 – effectively eliminating from protection all of the Ottoman period houses built in most of the cities. In the absence of an Israeli constitution and a new definition for antiquities, this same law enacted by the British Mandate government over 80 years ago still defines what are or are not antiquities sites in the State of Israel. This system of valuation has served on an official level both to further emphasize the distant, biblical past and to de-emphasize the more recent past linked to the lives of

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6 Some of the sites had an emphasis in more than one period and therefore that data point was sampled more than once. As a result, the percentages add up to more than 100%. In counting which time periods a site concentrated on, I looked at both the column detailing which time periods were present at the site and the column listing each particular year’s emphasis. Sites labeled with an extended occupation but that consistently listed just one or two periods as the emphasis of the excavation had the particular periods counted rather than the entire span of site occupation, since the excavators concentrated on a part of the record. This by no means represents an exhaustive survey of the sites being excavated in Israel and Palestine, but it does highlight the excavations that the popular English speaking audience is aware of and the periods of the past, which are emphasized to that audience. Additionally, this trend reflects the readership of *BAR* more generally – its readership is interested explicitly in *biblical* archaeology. El-Haj 1998: 184, n. 25, also discusses the trend of Israeli archaeology to concentrate on the periods prior to the late Roman period.
people who live in or own houses from the Ottoman period. However, archaeologists rarely discuss this unequal and discriminatory definition of the past. The affect that such legal definitions have on archaeological practice, along with the impact that Zionism and ideas of nationalist determination had on early archaeological narratives goes largely unacknowledged. From the time of Bliss’s first excavation for the P.E.F. in 1891 to the present, outside influences on archaeology have gone unrecognized and the myth of objectivity has reigned.

The New Archaeology of the 1960s strongly reinforced the idea that archaeology is objective, scientific inquiry separate from and uncontaminated by political agendas (e.g. Dever 1995). The new statistical and quantitative approaches to the archaeological record reinforced the prevailing, text-based narratives that had come to characterize archaeology of the Iron Age and later periods. However, new excavation techniques and new approaches to already excavated material did not bring about a concurrent expansion of archaeological inquiry. Although more prehistoric excavation began to take place, even after the New Archaeology revolution most archaeological resources continued to go towards the excavation, preservation, and promotion of biblically related sites. Foreign archaeologists continue to play an important role in the excavation of sites and the education of scholars, but their work serves to privilege biblical material over other time periods and research interests. Their focus on the biblical periods supports those strands of Israeli national narratives, which justify the existence of the State of Israel through the truth-value of the biblical texts attesting to Jewish rule in the Holy Land during the first millennium BCE. Even when other periods are studied and other material collected and catalogued, it is done, as Nadia Abu El-Haj (1998) has argued, only to reinforce the pre-
existing notions of history and of what the most important research objectives for archaeologists. “Archaeologists at work are guided by a prior conception of what history is – of the significant events of which it is made and of the significant finds in which it is embodied” (El-Haj 1998: 167). El-Haj problematizes the very act of making some parts of the past a part of the national heritage while classifying others as part of someone else’s national past.

The archaeological narratives written about Shechem follow along with the general trends of Israeli-Palestinian archaeological narratives. Tell Balata, the site now universally accepted as the site of biblical Shechem, was first identified as such in 1903 by a traveling German scholar (Wright 1965: 2). The site was first excavated in 1913-1914 by Professor Ernst Sellin, a German biblical scholar who had also worked at Jericho. He continued his excavations after World War I in 1926, finishing at the site finally in the 1930s. An American team re-visited the site from 1956 to 1962, digging for four seasons at the site. Both teams endured difficult political and physical conditions in order to carry out their work. Aware that biblical archaeologists were often considered to be amateurs by both archaeologists and theologians (Wright 1965: xvi), the American team strove to meet the contemporary archaeological standards for recording their work and finds at the site as well as to make their work relevant to the religious institutions funding their excavation. The 1965 book produced by the primary investigator of the site, George Ernest Wright, entitled Shechem the Biography of a Biblical City, reflects these disparate drives:

Modern Nablus bears a name that derives from “Neapolis” (“New City” in Greek). This was a Roman city established in A.D. 72 during the
reign of Emperor Vespasian; and indeed Roman-Byzantine ruins can still be seen in Nablus. Its predecessor was Shechem. A city with that name seems to be mentioned in Egyptian sources as early as the nineteenth century B.C. ... We also note that Shechem is the first Palestinian city mentioned in the Bible, for it is there that tradition credited Abram with receiving the news of the divine promise of the land of Canaan – Palestine, Lebanon, and southern Syria – to his descendants (Gen. 12:6-7). It is Jacob and his family, however, who are most closely connected with the city (cf. Gen. 33:18-20; 34), while Joseph is said to have been buried there in the plot of ground, which his father had purchased (Josh. 24:32).

We shall have occasion to refer later to the significance of these and other biblical traditions, in light of the excavations. (Wright 1965: 5)

In this brief review of the history of the site, Shechem is set up as the true, originary settlement of the area, with Nablus as a late interloper on the scene – the later Roman and Byzantine remains receive only this brief mention with the focus of the book being on the Bronze and Iron Age remains. Wright highlights the importance of the site based not on its archaeological value, but on account of its biblical associations. He was interested in the archaeology if he could relate it to the biblical traditions and the biblical narratives.

ZIONIST NARRATIVES

The driving focus on the Bible in early archaeological investigations in what was Ottoman Syria and, after World War I, the British Mandate of Palestine should not be separated from the concurrent rise of Zionist interests in Europe. The World Zionist Organization and Theodore Herzl began their work for a Jewish homeland in Palestine
during the same period of time in which archaeological fieldwork was first being carried out in Israel. Echoes of ideas about an historic right to the land can be heard in a paper by Chaim Weizmann addressed to Russian Zionists in the fall of 1908: “The persistence of the Jewish people through 2,000 years of dispersion is due to its capacity for organizing a group-life of its own, under whatever external conditions, on the basis of a spiritual idea – the idea of the eternity of Israel as bound up with the eternity and universality of the God of Israel. This idea, carrying with it as a corollary the belief in a future restoration of the people to its homeland, has been at the root of the Jewish attitude to life, and has supplied in the Jewish struggle for existence the place of the more concrete expressions of nationality” (Weizmann 1982: 135, emphasis added). Zionists narratives, though primarily focused on what the future held in store for the Jewish people upon their return to land, also never doubted the right of the Jewish people to return – a right guaranteed to them by God as His chosen people. Like the bones of Joseph, carried up from Egypt, so too would the Zionists return the Jewish people to their homeland.

Zionist discourse has changed greatly over the last one hundred years, stirring great debate in Israel and the Diaspora about the “right of return” and what exactly should be the extent of the State of Israel (Zerubavel 1995). Israelis particularly, forced to deal with the realities of being in the land, have begun to reshape their expectations, and these re-evaluations extend to archaeology. Israeli archaeologists such as Israel Finkelstein have challenged the biblical assumptions underlying much of Iron Age archaeology and have begun to offer competing explanations for the state of the material and textual record (Finkelstein 1988; Dever 1998; Gitin 1998; Finkelstein and Silberman
In the first chapter of his survey of the hill country of Benjamin, Finkelstein distances himself from archaeology grounded foremost in biblical studies:

The present study is primarily concerned with archaeology and settlement history. We will hardly touch upon the biblical evidence at all.... Without in any way minimizing the singular importance of the Bible for the study of the history of Israel, attempts to reconstruct the process of Israelite Settlement by means of traditional biblical archaeology – by seeking direct correspondences between excavated finds and the biblical text – have been notoriously unsuccessful. ... We believe that archaeological research in our generation must first attempt to reconstruct the process of Settlement on the basis of new work in the field; only later will it be possible to return to the biblical narrative in a fresh attempt to understand it. (1988: 22)

At the same time that the Bible enables some avenues of archaeological inquiry to be made, it shuts off other possibilities. The same questions that drove Fredrick Bliss in 1891 continue to drive the work of archaeologists in Israel today.

**PALESTINIAN NARRATIVES**

Palestinians have also mobilized to challenge the dominant narratives about the past that effectively elide their own place in the past and claims to a national identity. The Palestinian Authority has organized its own antiquities department to manage antiquities found in areas under its control, issuing permits for excavation and starting to create its own criteria for the evaluation of the importance of sites. With the help of Western archaeologists, often also with Palestinian archaeologists who have been trained abroad, Palestinian universities have begun to produce archaeologists trained in Palestine.
Another perspective on the past in the West Bank challenges the primacy of archaeology as the key to understanding and preserving the past. A group of architects in the West Bank city of Ramallah called RIWAQ\(^7\) began two projects to survey and preserve the crumbling remains of that city’s and Nablus’s historic Ottoman houses. They sought to preserve what they view as an important link to the past and to their identity – the buildings of the late Ottoman period not protected by current Israeli antiquities law. During the late Ottoman period, Nablus had been an important administrative and trade center (Doumani 1995: 1). The city is still well known for the soap industry that grew up in the city at that time. Ottoman period architecture dominates much of the Old City, and Nablus of the nineteenth century is looked back on as, “...the most important of the interior cities in terms of continuous settlement, density of population, economic activity, leadership role, and degree of autonomy within Ottoman rule” (ibid: 7-8). Palestinian scholars such as Bashara Doumani wish to shift the focus of scholarship from the Biblical, Crusader and modern periods to periods of Arab and Muslim rule (6). The work of RIWAQ represents another move to highlight the importance of less studied periods.

All of the buildings they surveyed in their pilot project in Ramallah and in their subsequent project in Nablus had been built between 1700 and 1948, between the cut-off date of the antiquities law and the introduction of what they term “intrusive architectural elements” to the locally evolved building style. RIWAQ’s emphasis on this more recent past, a past which is still very alive to people living in the old Ottoman houses, plays against notions of the long ago past, deeply seeped in religious significance, as being the most important part of the past. Their shift in emphasis highlights the agendas underlying

\(^7\) For more information on RIWAQ and the work they do, visit their website at: http://www.riwaq.org.
much archaeological inquiry into the past, subtly challenging the hegemony of such inquiries as too restrictive and too far removed from daily life.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

The call for reflexive archaeology has been in circulation in the international community for at least fifteen years (Shanks and Tilley 1987a, 1987b) and has gone largely unheeded among archaeologists working in Israel and Palestine (with the exception of the archaeologists at Tel Aviv University). Practicing a reflexive and responsible archaeology is undoubtedly the first step to address the imbalance of power in the archaeological communities of the Near East, just as a recent edited volume has emphasized (Meskell 1998: 3). A few changes immediately suggest themselves. I would suggest that more care could be taken in the naming of such integral parts of the archaeological project as the standard periodization. Referring to the period of 1000 to 950 BCE as the United Monarchy (of King David and King Solomon) rather than the Iron IIA in popular publications promotes the biblical emphasis of Israeli-Palestinian archaeology to our popular audience. Although archaeologists make use of the technical terms in their publications for other professionals, they often use the popularized names in non-academic publications. For whatever reason this is done, it serves to reinforce the biblical narratives as the only legitimate one to be told in the minds of those non-professionals who follow archaeology by continually associating the past of Israel-Palestine with the Bible rather than any of the other periods with which it could be associated. Standardizing the periodization between professional and popular journals could begin the process of de-privileging the biblical narrative and of opening up a more complex understanding of the past.
Simply renaming the periods will not, of course, bring about parity to the Palestinians and the Israelis, and archaeologists should not be naive about the potential impact of their work. Nonetheless, we also must recognize that our work is not politically neutral. Not only should we work to raise consciousness about the impact of our work on the places where we work, but also we must examine how the very structure of our discipline leads us to privilege certain questions over others (Shanks and Tilley 1987b: 191; Meskell 1998: 3). Instead, we should work to produce and present a more complex and nuanced understanding of the past. I would urge with Albert Glock that we should not erase Israeli and Jewish history in favor of Palestinian and Arab history (Glock in Kapitan 1999: 321). Rather, through complications and renamings we would move toward equalizing Palestinian and Israeli claims to the past. Just as a direct relationship between Palestinians of the late twentieth century CE and Canaanites of the late tenth century BCE is difficult to support, so is a direct relationship between modern Israelis and Israelites of the biblical era. In trying to make direct links with the past through archaeology, archaeologists have produced a distorted picture of the past through selective use of the archaeological record.

Perhaps Israel’s example of national mythologizing run amok can stand as a cautionary tale for the Palestinians in the process of developing their own national narratives. Developing a coherent national identity is vitally important not just for creating at least a fiction of Palestinian unity, but important also for the presentation of Palestinian needs to the international community through such venues as the International Committee for the Red Cross and the United Nations. Scholars in cultural studies acknowledge the importance of the past, history and imagined communities in the
formation of modern nations and national identity (Anderson 1991: 6; 11-12; Clifford 1997). Nations bring people together into imagined communities not just through the progressive rhetoric of the present but also through appeals to the imagined, shared past. Homi Bhabha highlights not only the importance of the past but its creative power when working in the present: “The scraps, patches, and rags of daily life must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a national culture, while the very act of the narrative performance interpellates a growing circle of national subjects. In the production of the nation as narration there is a split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative” (Bhabha, 1990: 297). The ordinary, disparate aspects of daily life Bhabha identifies as “scraps, patches, and rags” are the stuff of which national identity is made. Nationalist narratives perform a double duty: both to create the nation in the minds of people and to teach people what the nation is and what it stands for. The work of archaeologists falls on both sides of this pedagogical-performative split, and the result for archaeologists implicate their “objective” study in the boiling morass of modern Middle Eastern politics in an immediate and pressing manner. National narratives draw on academic understandings of and agendas for the exploration of the past (and those academic understandings and agendas are, in turn, influenced by the dominant national narratives). For archaeologists to fail to come to terms with the implications and outcomes of their work is only to further implicate themselves in the politicized discourse of which archaeological narratives are a part.

When the “homeland” granted to the Palestinians is itself merely shreds and patches of the landscape, scraps on a map that do not even connect, we may come to
understand how Palestinian identity itself is formed in these necessarily liminal spaces, in
the very absence of any certainty of a nationalist pedagogy. At the same time, the stories
that the Palestinians have come to tell about themselves as a nation must be understood in
conjunction with the narrative themes of Israeli national identity. Although the scraps and
patches that the Israelis have worked with have been less literal, they nonetheless have
also had to stitch together the pieces of cultural signification that Jews from all over the
world have brought to Israel as part of their new nationalism. Archaeology can be used to
understand the patchiness of these national identities because it is one of the primary
ways in which both Palestinians and Israelis (along with a large number of other peoples
around the world) have tried to make their national identities cohere. The shreds and
patches of cultural signification from many different groups of people with different
backgrounds can be given a fiction of national unity to act out when they believe that
they share a unique past.

With the rising awareness of the political impact of their work, archaeologists
working in Israel and the West Bank have a chance to positively change the effects their
narratives produce. Archaeologists, whether Israeli, Palestinian or foreigner, must re-
evaluate their work and commit themselves to a politically responsible archaeology.
Shanks and Tilley long ago emphasized the need for a critical archaeology which
“...involves us in a reading of the past which at the same time invites us to shape a
different future. The study of the past is a means of providing a medium for a critical
challenge to the present. ...[P]eople make history with an awareness of history, and may
extend or rupture it through their day-to-day praxis in the world. A critical archaeology is
an invitation to live this awareness of our historicity, this potentiality” (1987b: 196).
While archaeologists cannot be held accountable for everything done with the results of their work, they can consider what the possible consequence of their research will be. Dialogue regarding these potential outcomes must be continued and promoted among archaeologists in Israel-Palestine. Archaeological narratives undoubtedly have the power to reinforce dominant ideologies and the national myths that hold together modern nations. Perhaps archaeologists, particularly those working in areas as politically volatile as Israel and the Palestinian territories, can work instead towards producing archaeological narratives that challenge the dominant ideologies and national myths rather than support them, and ultimately aid in diffusing tensions, perhaps even adding a new dimension to the peace process – striving to live the awareness of our historicity and to explore the potential of archaeology to impact the world around us.

To return to the question with which I started this paper, “Who’s buried in Joseph’s Tomb?”, the answer is that it does not in truth matter as long as the discussion about the site remains grounded primarily in religious narratives. Only through recognizing the narrative threads that tie archaeology, religion, settlement, and politics together can we begin to reform and transform the narrative and move beyond the current questions and categories that constrain archaeological and political innovation in Israel and the West Bank.

Acknowledgements. I would like to thank Stanford University’s Archaeology Center for organizing and supporting both the conference for which this paper was written and the Stanford Journal of Archaeology; in particular I would like to thank Trinity Jackman and Chris Witmore for all of their hard work and Ian Hodder for reading many drafts of this paper.
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