THE LOST PARADISE: THE ROLE OF THE WITNESS IN SHAPING THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF JERUSALEM

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Jerusalem is not merely occupied; it is actively rewritten. This piece examines how Palestinian witness testimony defies the gradual violence of erasure, transforming the city from a site of dispossession into an assertion of historical continuity. Drawing from decolonial theory, phenomenology, and political philosophy, I argue that testimony is not merely an act of remembrance but an epistemic and ontological intervention that challenges both material oppression and the state's monopolization of historical truth. I interrogate the material conditions of occupation, positioning them within a broader philosophy of spatial domination: the destruction of Palestinian homes, the calculated deprivation of infrastructure, and the juridical apparatus that renders Palestinian existence precarious. Drawing on Nur-eldeen Masalha's concept of memoricide, I examine how settler-colonial power operates not just through territorial expansion but through the systematic erasure and reconstruction of historical narratives, turning Jerusalem into a battleground of meaning as much as land. Testimony emerges here not as passive recollection but as an act of existential resistance. The act of witnessing asserts both the primacy of lived experience and the refusal of epistemic erasure, positioning Palestinian memory as a challenge to the structures that seek to render it illegible. Judith Butler's work on 'grievability' is mobilized to interrogate how international frameworks of recognition operate to exclude Palestinian suffering from the category of the politically visible. Further on, I situates testimony within digital landscapes, analyzing the El-Kurd family's plight in Sheikh Jarrah as an extension of what James C. Scott terms 'hidden transcripts,' a counter-history that bypasses the gatekeepers of official discourse. 'Digital *sumud*' is introduced as a contemporary iteration of Palestinian endurance, where social media functions not just as documentation but as a subversion of hegemonic narratives. Ultimately, this essay argues that Palestinian testimony does more than document loss. It disrupts, resists, and reclaims. The struggle over Jerusalem is not just territorial; it is a war over meaning itself, and through the voices of those who refuse to be erased, the city remains a living archive of defiance.

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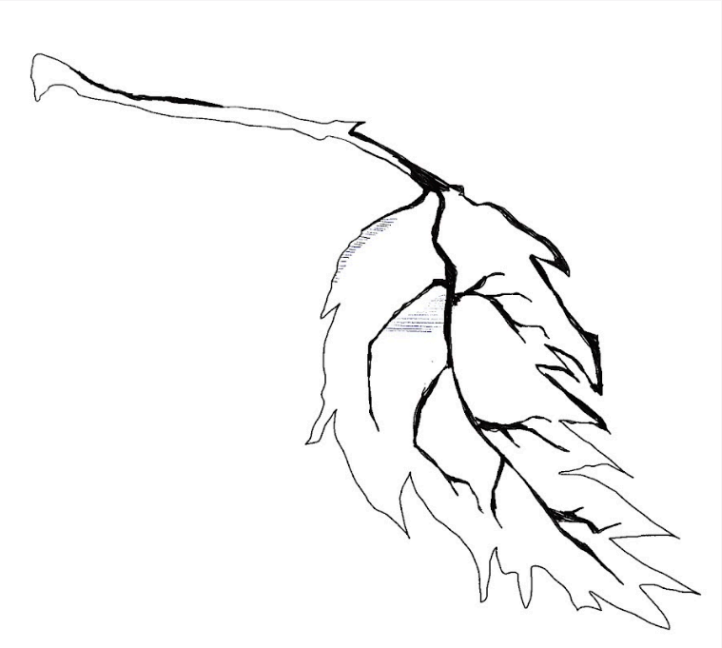

You were probably too young when the Zionist monster gobbled up the most beautiful half of the most beautiful city [Jerusalem] in the world [...] But I walked up and down all its hills, among its houses built of stone – white stone, pink stone, red stone – castle – like houses [...] You'd think they were jewels [...] remind me of flowers in its valleys, of Spring, of the glitter of its blue skies after spring showers [...] Flowers like children's eyes spring up from beneath the stones and around the barren roots of trees. [...] This is why nights bring back to me memories of Jerusalem, and I grieve and rage and cry.[1]

Cradled between the Mediterranean and the Dead Sea, Jerusalem stands: a fortress where the weight of millennia collides with the everyday grit of Palestinian endurance. For over 5000 years, its history has been inscribed in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, where faith stands on the cusp of resurrection and loss; Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, wherein the Dome of the Rock glimmers gold with time-defying splendour and sanctity. Far beyond landmarks, both are witnesses to the continuity that renders Jerusalem both eternal and contested. In the heart of the Old City, four labyrinthine quarters bear the imprints of the many cultures and beliefs that found shelter within its walls, preserving their ancient rituals as they are watched, judged, and endangered. I will examine how Palestinian testimonies transform Jerusalem from a space of dispossession into a site of radical hope and resistance through interweaving sacred memory and material struggle. Their accounts consistently frame their connection to the city and the country through dual registers: the immediate reality of occupation and displacement alongside an unshakeable vision of Jerusalem as both ancestral home and sanctuary. Through analysis of these witness accounts, examination of Israeli policies as tools of oppression, and decolonial theory, I will demonstrate how testimony serves as both documentation and transformation, revealing Jerusalem as a living archive of a paradise lost and paradise imagined.

I. The Material Conditions

Beneath the Holy veneer, about 388,720[2] Palestinians live in occupied Jerusalem[3], where 'home' is often an inherited space that carries the stories of generations. Collapsing infrastructure, inconsistent water lines, and erratic electrical and sewage systems: the Israeli municipality presides over this chaos, offering little more than calculated neglect. State-protected Israeli settlers push ever closer, erecting flags like markers of conquest, dragging a long standing policy of daily antagonism. 1948 saw the *Nakba*[4], the conquest of Palestine and the establishment of the state of Israel through the expulsion and mass displacement of more than half of historic Palestine's population, and the destruction of Palestinians' cultural, social, and political structures. Thousands of Jerusalemites were expelled from their homes as Zionist forces advanced towards the city. The depopulation of the Arab neighbourhoods in western Jerusalem was among the most comprehensive of any Palestinian city. Since the seizing of 1967, urban growth has been stifled through the systematic denial of building permits and the seizure of property to constrict the future of Jerusalem and its Arab inhabitants.

II. Reimagining the Homeland

Paradise as a concept takes on a particular significance when applied to Jerusalem's Palestinian inhabitants. Their paradise, not a distant promised realm, but a tangible homeland from which they have been systematically alienated. In this context, the witness's account serves not merely as a historical record, but rather an active form of resistance against the erasure of Palestinian history and thus, identity as a whole. Through their eyes, we experience Jerusalem not as a city of abstract religious importance but as a sentient entity shaped by its people's continuous struggle and resilience. The concept of witnessing extends beyond mere observation to encompass a moral and ethical

dimension. Within the landscapes of trauma and oppression, the act of bearing witness becomes a mode of testimony that actively counters erasure and articulates a claim to justice. Palestinians witnessing the ongoing transformation of Jerusalem are not passive spectators but agents of memory; making an ethical commitment to consistently preserve and reassert an identity endangered.

III. Justice, Memory, and Paradise Redefined

In Islamic cosmology, Jerusalem is inextricably linked to paradise; being the site of the Prophet Muhammad's Night Journey and Ascension (*Isra and Mi'raj*), an axis mundi that collapses earthly limitations and the divine realm. This echoes through Christian and Jewish theology as well, which similarly imbues the city with paradisal qualities. In Christianity, Jerusalem is a vision of the Heavenly City, a prefiguration of the Kingdom of God; for Judaism, it is the focal point of messianic hope, a place to which prayers for ultimate redemption are perpetually directed.

However, the interaction with the notion of paradise transcends purely religious connotations and inevitably enters the realm of the everyday. It embodies a concrete vision of temporal justice that permeates its physical and social fabric, rooted in the lived realities of the present rather than abstract or deferred eschatological ideals. In this context, temporal justice captures the relentless efforts of Jerusalem's Palestinian inhabitants to maintain their presence and claim their rights to the city, even as they face systematic dispossession. It shifts the focus from Jerusalem as merely a religious or theological aspiration to a contested space of reclamation wherein the histories and lived experiences of Palestinians actively defy narratives of erasure. This justice is inextricably linked to the soil itself –the ontological status of the city. Within this duality lies the tension between its status as both promised and perpetually deferred paradise; its eschatological aspirations colliding with the quotidian experiences of its inhabitants.

IV. Memoricide

Palestinian scholar Nur-eldeen Masalha's concept of 'memoricide' – the systematic destruction of Palestinian cultural heritage and memory – is the ultimate framework for understanding the importance of witness testimonies in Jerusalem. Masalha (2015) explores how neutrality cannot exist when it comes to naming places, due to its inherent tie to the history, identity, and memory of those who reside there. In the case of Palestine, place names connect Palestinians to their land through generations of cultural and social memory. When these names are erased or changed, the connection is disrupted. In fact, the very act of renaming is a well-known colonial strategy – similar to Zimbabwe/Rhodesia, Ulster/Northern Ireland, and such– and is extensively utilized by the settler Israeli government. Consider the case of Silwan, a Palestinian neighbourhood in Eastern Jerusalem; branded as the 'City of David' due to an illegitimate archaeological site, and thus forcefully enveloped into a false colonial narrative which centred Jewish biblical history and strategically displaced long standing Palestinian

presence. Renaming efforts like these are made to legitimize Israeli connection to the land and advance their ideological-national goals, such as creating a new collective identity for Jewish immigrants from Europe, who were often not native to the Middle East. After the Nakba of 1948, the renaming projects were intensified. The Israeli government officially adopted a policy of replacing Arabic place names with Hebrew ones, establishing committees specifically to facilitate this, such as the Committee for the Designation of Place-Names in the Negev Region. Since 1967, the naming conventions adopted by Israeli authorities for

settlements across the Golan Heights, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip intensified, to advance broader national ideological narratives. This was particularly evident in the historical usage of the biblical designations Judea and Samaria in place of 'West Bank' – an intentional linguistic choice that reinforced particular political and historical claims to these territories (Katz, 1995). Invoking these ancient names allows the Israeli state to embed its narrative within a biblical framework, effectively intertwining modern geopolitics with religious and historical symbolism to assert legitimacy in their Zionist movement. Claiming a divine ultimatum – the biblical covenant in which God is said to have promised the land of Israel to the Jewish people – as justification allows the Israeli state to bolster its Zionist rhetoric to grant moral and scripturally-backed legitimacy to its settlement expansions and territorial annexation. Religious interpretations of Jewish texts vary significantly, with many groups viewing them through spiritual or historical lenses rather than justification for territorial control. Ultra-Orthodox groups like Neturei Karta[5] and secular anti-Zionist movements explicitly reject the notion that these texts mandate modern state formation. Despite this diversity of Jewish thought, the Israeli government frequently positions itself as the singular representative of Jewish identity and interests. This positioning serves to deflect criticism through two mechanisms: first, by marginalizing anti-Zionist Jewish voices, and second, by characterizing external criticism as inherently anti-Semitic. Such framing creates a chilling effect where critics may self-censor out of fear of being labelled anti-Semitic, even when raising legitimate policy concerns. This conflation between political criticism and anti-Semitism ultimately undermines efforts to combat actual instances of anti-Jewish prejudice by blurring the distinction between genuine bigotry and principled political disagreement. And so, in this context, Palestinian witnesses become guardians of memory, their testimonies actively counteracting memoricide. Witnessing is a reclamation of narrative and space, sustaining a vision of Jerusalem that defies state-imposed amnesia and preserving the histories that doctored maps and offshore-funded faux archaeological sites attempt to erase. The significance of such testimonies lies in their resistance to ideological hegemony and consistent assertion that the sacred and the human are intertwined, and that memory, as is the city itself, is both a battleground and a sanctuary.

V. *Intifadas* and the Persistence of Memory

Since 1967, Palestinians in Jerusalem have lived under an occupation that permeates every aspect of daily life; the slow constriction of day-to-day activities at the hands of the IDF[6], increased settler violence, and state-sponsored failing infrastructure. In the decades following, Israel pursued policies specifically aimed at altering Jerusalem's demographical balance. The construction of settlements in occupied Eastern Jerusalem, along with discriminatory residency laws and home demolitions steadily eroded Palestinian presence in the city. The battle for Jerusalem is fought house after house, family after family. Each Palestinian home demolished and each family expelled is but a part of a larger strategy to erase Palestinian existence in the city. Witness accounts from this period document not only the hardships of surviving under occupation but also the myriad ways in which Jerusalemites stubbornly maintained their presence despite staring down the barrel of the gun.

Naturally, this was not only confined to Jerusalem. On February 26th of 1988, while returning from grazing sheep near Nablus, seventeen-year-old Wael Joudeh and his cousin Osamah encountered what would become the first recorded instance of Yitzhak Rabin's infamous 'breaking the bones' policy[7] , which transformed further into a 'shoot to maim' directive as the occupation spanned decades. Both remain regularly implemented to this day as a means for Israel to continue its slaughter of Gaza and violence in the West Bank and Occupied Territories. The 2018 Great March of Return demonstrated the enduring impact of Rabin's legacy, as occupying forces targeted Palestinian civilians during peaceful protests. Of the 5,972 documented injuries, 493 involved upper limbs, 4,903 lower limbs, and 940 children were left permanently disabled[8] . Wael and Osamah were followed by IOF soldiers who severely beat them over thirty minutes, using stones to intentionally break their bones. Wael was struck on the head with a soldier's helmet, knocked to the ground, and beaten further. Osamah, who tried to escape, was dragged down by three soldiers and subjected to the same brutal treatment. "They not only wanted to break our bones and inflict physical pain on us, they also wanted to humiliate us and shatter our spirit."[9] The soldiers'

actions, including one's declaration that he was 'born to kill Palestinians,' only further demonstrates how individual acts of violence embodied broader institutional policies, despite the insistence on their supposed isolated nature. Unbeknownst to him at the time, Wael's incident was documented by a witness in a nearby building, which transformed his private trauma into public evidence and ultimately led to international media attention and eventual release. While the cousins were held at Tubas' al-Faraa detention centre in the occupied West Bank, a soldier stormed their cell berating Wael for "the whole world [thinking] [he is] dead" due to the documentation and subsequent barrage of journalists at the detention centre. Here, the power of witnesshood lies in its ability to expose oppressive systems by disseminating the truths that counter the oppressor's false narratives. In Wael and Osamah's case, the Israeli narrative relied on framing Palestinians as inherent security threats, justifying acts of violence and imprisonment under the guise of maintaining order. This framework, central to Israel's occupation policies, obscures the systemic nature of the violence imposed upon Palestinians, portraying it as reactive and necessary rather than deliberate, calculated, and intentionally oppressive. However, the act of witnessing disrupts this constructed narrative. The video evidence did not merely document violence but shifted the locus of power; it bore witness to the cruelty of Israel's engineered strategies created to physically and psychologically crush Palestinian resistance. By capturing the soldiers' deliberate brutality, the video countered claims of self-defence or necessity and ultimately forced the global community to confront the systemic use of violence as a tool of domination.

Beyond immediate outcomes, acts of witnesshood erode the foundations of the oppressor's long-term ability to sustain their narrative. Every act of documentation creates a counter-history that outlives the manufactured myths created to obscure it and preserve the truth for future generations. Witnesshood not only safeguards memory against erasure but also amplifies solidarity; mobilizing international actors who might otherwise remain uninvolved, by placing their lived experiences into the public consciousness. In Wael's case, his testimony –reinforced by visual evidence –became not only an act of survival, but a symbol of defiance in a system designed to strip it away as well.

Decades later, he returned to the site of his assault to give his testimony, breathing life into the space and re-establishing it as a site of Palestinian resilience rather than submission, challenging both temporal and spatial attempts at erasure. Witnesshood in this sense is enduring; it is neither passive nor fleeting. It actively reclaims what oppression seeks to obliterate, ensuring that the stories of the oppressed remain a challenge to the oppressor's narrative long after the moment has passed. Joudeh recalls that "the stones of Palestine were merciful, that's why we survived." The very tools used for their torture became, in his narrative, symbols of Palestinian resilience and their deep-seated connection to the land itself. Wael and Osamah are now regarded as key figures of the first Intifada; their experiences igniting a movement that compelled the Arab League to convene an emergency meeting to address the fate of the people in the occupied Palestinian territories (Hammad, 2017). "I always tell my children what happened to me. I do not ever try to hide it," Wael says. "They always tell my story to their colleagues and friends."

VI. Testimony as Existential Resistance

Within Jerusalem's contested spaces, Palestinian witness testimony crystallizes into something beyond mere narrative – it becomes an assertion of existence against

systematic erasure. The voice becomes a tool of persistence. It operates within the interstices of power, embodying what James C. Scott terms 'hidden transcripts,' (1990) vital narratives that take place offstage, pulsing beneath the official histories created by power holders. Naturally, the absence of proper state structures has transformed the collective Palestinian memory into a cornerstone of identity formation.

Memory serves as one of the few ways Palestinians can assert their identity. The transmission of pre-1948 Jerusalem memories across generations does not simply preserve the past – it disrupts the temporal boundaries often imposed on Palestinian claims to presence and establishes a continuity that defies political demarcations.

Furthermore, contemporary digital outlets have revolutionized the witness landscape. In May of 2021, the Israeli government ordered six Palestinian families to vacate their homes in Eastern Jerusalem neighbourhood Sheikh Jarrah to make way for Israeli settlers, despite living there for generations. The court rulings[10] culminate a decades-long legal and existential battle for these families to remain rooted in their community. In 1972, several Jewish settler organizations –often heavily financed by international donors –filed multiple lawsuits claiming historic Jewish ownership of the land. These well-funded efforts eventually led to the ongoing displacement of 43 residents in 2002, the Hanoun and Ghawi families in 2008, and the Shamasneh family in 2017. In the case of the El-Kurd family, who had faced displacement during the aforementioned evictions, social media emerged as a crucible of immediate testimony. 22-year-old Mohammed El-Kurd, through digital documentation, managed to lobby 81 UK lawmakers to sign a letter calling for an end to the dispossession of Palestinian families in Jerusalem, including his very own. Notably, El-Kurd was eleven years old when he returned home to his family's belongings tossed to the street as Israeli settlers took over half of his home. In an article he wrote in 2020, he describes them returning more than a decade later 'to finish what they started[11]' . In his article, El-Kurd describes his grandmother's plight after being expelled from Haifa, amongst countless others, during the *Nakba*. In 1956, she resettled in Sheikh Jarrah along with 28 refugee families where she was promised legal title to the property within three years. The false promise dissipated. "Still, my grandmother remained. She raised and buried her daughters in Sheikh Jarrah. My parents married in our house. We planted pomegranates, apples, oranges, figs."

El-Kurd reclaimed his family's narrative by summoning others to bear witness to the same injustices that had forced his grandmother into exile, pushing her from Haifa to Sheikh Jarrah in the wake of the *Nakba*. Yet where she endured her displacement in silence, bound by the limits of her time, El-Kurd wielded digital platforms to amplify his struggle, weaving a network of witnesshood that spanned continents. This contrast reveals a haunting continuity: the machinery of dispossession remains unchanged, but the mediums through which Palestinians resist and testify have evolved, turning individual grief into a global chorus demanding justice. The concept of 'digital sumud[12]' comes to mind; these platforms – from independent journalism to Instagram live streaming – transform documentation into resistance by creating networks of witness that bypass traditional gatekeepers of narrative control. This technological shift has not merely amplified Palestinian voices; it has fundamentally altered the dynamics of who controls the story of Sheikh Jarrah, of Jerusalem, of Palestine.

VII. The Moral Weight of Witnessing

The various ethical dimensions of witnessing in Jerusalem reveal much about the intersection between personal trauma and the collective imperative. Witnesses navigate treacherous terrain between the

necessity of testimony and the weight of its emotional toll as they inevitably bear the cross. Becoming repositories of both their individual and shared histories, they are transformed into custodians of truth in a space where reality itself is contested. The ethical burden of witnessing does not rest solely on those who testify; it extends to those who receive these testimonies. Judith Butler's (2016) framework of "grievability" takes on particular resonance. Testimony challenges the hierarchies of whose lives matter, whose lives are worthy of grief. In the context of Jerusalem, the challenge is to create conditions where Palestinian lives and experiences are seen as equally allowed grief. Professor Richard Falk (2023), in his extensive writings, asserts that bearing witness without action risks turning suffering into spectacle. This cuts to the very heart of the witness's dilemma –ensuring testimony catalyzes change rather than voyeuristically documenting loss. Eventually, critical questions arise regarding the responsibilities of the international community, academics, and activists who engage with these testimonies. How can one ethically do so without appropriating Palestinian suffering, and reducing it to an academic or emotional exercise?

These witness accounts are not just stories; they ar* potential evidence. In documenting the ongoing Nakba in Jerusalem, these testimonies lay the groundwork for future justice and accountability (Erakat, 2019). Each account becomes one component of a larger mosaic of documentation on the path toward justice. Thus, the act of bearing witness functions as both present resistance and future possibility – a bridge between current documentation and eventual accountability, eventual reclamation of paradise.

VIII. Conclusion

In concluding this exploration, I return to the metaphor of the lost paradise. The examined testimonies reveal a Jerusalem that exists in parallel to the physical – a Jerusalem of memory, of resistance, and of continued stubborn Palestinian presence despite systematic attempts at erasure. The witnesses to Jerusalem's transformation from Nakba survivors to contemporary digital activists do more than preserve a record of injustice. They actively participate in the metaphysical creation of a future Jerusalem, one in which the paradise is not irretrievably lost but waiting to be reclaimed.

Through witness accounts, we are able to view a Jerusalem that defies simplified narratives of division. Instead, we encounter a city that exists and continually expands in the collective memory of its Palestinian inhabitants; a paradise that persists in the face of pseudo-divine injustice. In the contested terrain of Jerusalem, I echo Mahmoud Darwish's words: "In Jerusalem, […] within the ancient walls, I walk from one epoch to another without a memory to guide me."[13]

For those who bear witness – from the ancient stones of its East to the scattered corners of global exile – Jerusalem persists, not merely a physical place, but as the embodiment of memory itself. Through testimony, the city transforms from a site of loss into a continuum of perpetual return, each act of remembrance reaffirming not only what was forcefully taken, but what endures.

Footnotes

1.From The Ship, by Jabra Ibrahim Jabra. See Jabra (1985)

2. In 2022, the population was around 971,800 residents, of which almost 60% were Jews and almost 40% Palestinians.

3. Statistics on the demographics of Jerusalem pertain to the unified and expanded Israeli-controlled municipality, encompassing the pre-1967 Israeli and Jordanian municipalities, along with additional Palestinian villages and neighbourhoods to the northeast. While some of these areas have been effectively relinquished to the West Bank due to the construction of the Israeli West Bank barrier, their legal status as part of Jerusalem has not been formally revoked.

4. Transliteration of "النكبة", meaning “catastrophe” in Arabic.

5. “Neturei Karta International (NKI) is a community of activists representing many Jews worldwide who stand up for and promote traditional Judaism in opposition to the philosophy of Zionism. Due to religious belief, [they] oppose the existence of Israel, its occupation of Palestine, and condemn its ongoing wars and atrocities inside and outside Palestine.” See Neturei Karta International.

6. Israeli Defence Forces. Better known locally as IOF, Israeli Occupation Forces.

7. Israel’s Defense Minister (1987-1993) and later Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin infamously ordered his soldiers to use “force, might, and beatings” in order to subdue the Palestinian “rebels” during the First Intifada, earning him a reputation as the “bone-breaker.” He went on to win the Nobel Peace Prize.

8. According to a Report of the UN Commission of Inquiry on the 2018 protests in the OPT.

9. See the account of Wael Joudeh in Hammad (2017) with Aljazeera for a description of the psychological and physical impact of Israeli policies during the first Intifada.

10. Under international law, the Israeli judicial system has no legal authority over the population it occupies.

11. See Mohammed El-Kurd for The Nation, 2020

12. *Sumud*, transliteration of "صمود" meaning ‘steadfastness’ in Arabic. The concept was explored by Mariam Barghouthi in 2021 via an X (formerly Twitter) thread.

13. From ‘In Jerusalem.’ See Darwish, 2005

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