CHAPTER SEVEN

CREATING GEOGRAPHICAL AND POLITICAL UTOPIAS: THE TEN LOST TRIBES AND THE EAST

For Jewish intellectuals in antiquity, the concept of “the East” had contradictory geographical and historical connotations, calling to mind both the land of the oldest tradition of wisdom and science, known since time immemorial, and the site of a bitter period of captivity. The former is connected with Abraham, who went forth from Ur of the Chaldees to journey to the land of Canaan; the latter refers to the first deportation of Israel to the land “beyond the river,” before and after the destruction of the First Temple. Successive developments reveal quite astonishing aspects of the notion of the East. The concept of “Oriental wisdom,” the quintessence of Chaldean religion and culture, was incorporated more and more into the understanding of a Jewish national heritage, gradually becoming the intellectual property of the Jewish people; the land “beyond the river” took on utopian dimensions as the land of “perfect Judaism.” The geographical concept of the East became, increasingly, the transfiguration of a political and religious motif into a utopian myth that functioned not only as a Feuerbachian category of alienation, but also as a spur to the Jewish community to resist assimilation into the dominant cultures that surrounded it.

The nature of utopian thought is always both creative and explosive. Often it is a subversive enterprise, or at least it is perceived as such: the myth of the “Ten Lost Tribes,” to which the idea of the Orient in Judaism is linked, was interpreted, first by the Romans and later by Christians, in the context of a political preoccupation with possible, or purported, Jewish military might. Down to the eighteenth century, Jewish (and Christian) “Orientalism” does not conform with Said’s concept of it as academic alienation, although, as I illustrate in the following, the two notions do bear certain similarities.

For this reason, in seeking to define the concept of the East in Jewish tradition, modern scholarship cannot ignore the legend of the Ten Lost Tribes in its simultaneous function as both the utopian construction of an alienated minority and the means of that same minority’s political deconstruction by the dominant culture, through its use as military
propaganda. Apologetic thought, messianic expectations, utopian imagination, and imaginative geography provide the cornerstones of an endless narrative linked to the idea of the Orient. Much has already been written on the subject. The present chapter aims to provide certain historical and literary insights related to the concept of “Oriental” Jews, both as a self-image and as a communicative perception. “Ontological” and “epistemological” premises are required to explain how the concept of the Orient has been passed down over generations, leading up to Said’s deconstruction of its academic use as an expression of ancient and contemporary European colonialism.1 My considerations proceed from a Jewish (and Christian) point of view and should be seen as an attempt to better elucidate the implications of speaking about geography, culture, and religion in actual practice.

Geography, as an ancient and medieval branch of knowledge, should not be confused with the modern science that succeeded it, a study of the earth’s physical features, resources, political divisions, climate, population, and so forth. In writing about their journeys (most often fanciful and full of geographic imaginings) and in depicting customs and “geographical” data, ancient geographers reproduced a typical product of their “mental map” of history and peoples.2 As defined by Downs (1996), mental mapping is “the process by which all humans organize and make sense of the environment around them. Cognitive, or mental, maps arise from the storage and memory of spatial information that is necessary to survive. They reflect the world as perceived, not necessarily as it is.”3 The perception one has of other peoples and lands often stems from one’s own self-perception and identity. Only the analysis of the process, or the different processes, involved in identifying

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