

- 1947 - The United Nations voted for the partition of Palestine (i.e. the remaining 23%) between the Jews and the Arabs. Under International Law it legally entitled the two communities to establish in the area of Palestine west of the river Jordan their own respective sovereign states. In May 1948 the Jews elected to do so. The Arabs chose instead to declare war on the new Jewish state with the object of securing the whole land for themselves, a war which they lost, and which resulted in the 1948 cease-fire lines, and the Palestinian Arab refugee problem.

- 1949 - Israel was accepted into full membership of the United Nations.

The Arab rejection of the validity of the Balfour Declaration and of the legal basis for the Jewish state is therefore a rejection of the sovereignty of God. This rejection is especially serious in the case of Arab Christians.

The existence of these Biblical, historical and legal rights of the Jewish people to the land of Israel, in no way negates the normal rights of the existing Arab population of the land, nor becomes a basis on which to deny Arabs any rights in the land some have lived in for varying lengths of time. Indeed the Jewish people are Biblically and morally bound to consider and accommodate those rights where possible.

However, natural rights must at times be overridden by higher considerations - in this case Biblical and Divine -and this is common in the internal conduct of benevolent nations, and between such nations. Israel's dilemma is how to square these conflicting claims, and she has done far better and made much greater efforts than the world at large cares to recognise.

SOME FINAL OBSERVATIONS

The fundamental issue today is that the power of Islam is contending at every level the Jewish peoples' Biblical, historical and legal right to Eretz Israel (the Land of Israel) as their national possession and homeland. Sadly, the Palestinian occupants of Judea, Samaria and Gaza have become pawns of this powerful spiritual/ political anti-God power. The increasing frequency with which Arabs suspected of moderation or any wish to co-exist peaceably with Israel are being assassinated by fellow Arabs indicates the true nature and intentions of extremist Islamic forces arrayed against Israel.

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WHOSE LAND?

In view of the relentless pressure upon Israel to yield up Judea and Samaria for a "Palestinian State", it is essential that concerned people understand clearly the basis upon which Christians are called to support the legitimacy of the State of Israel, and of the Jewish people's right to occupy the whole of the land of Israel, including Judea and Samaria. This article endeavours to explore the Biblical, historical and legal rights of the Jewish people to occupy the land of Israel.

If God, in His sovereignty over the nations, has indeed chosen both the land and people of Israel for His redemptive purposes, especially for this present time, then it becomes a deeply serious matter when the Church in particular, but also nations, deny that choice.

"*WHOSE IS THE LAND?*" is therefore a fundamental question, and the answer we settle for will deeply colour our interpretation of both past and present events.

BIBLICALLY

Biblically the territory known as Israel, including Judea and Samaria, belongs to the Jewish people. When God made a covenant with Abraham he gave the land of Canaan to his descendants as an everlasting possession (Genesis 15:7-21; 17:7-8). This promise of ownership was transferred through Isaac and Jacob to the twelve sons (tribes) of Israel (Genesis 26:3-4; 28:13-14; 35:12; Psalm 105:8-11). It is important to note that the Arab claim that the land also belongs to them by divine promise is unfounded, since, although Ishmael is certainly blessed by God, the covenant is with Isaac (Genesis 17:7-8, 18-21; 21:12).

God refers to the unique character of this territory by referring to it as "My land" (Ezekiel 36:5,20; 38:16; Joel 3:2), and as the Jewish peoples "own land" (Ezekiel 36:17,24; 37:21). Indeed, the people of Israel and the land of Israel are so intertwined in scripture as to be described as "married" to each other (Isaiah 62:4-5). The unique relationship of the Jewish people to Eretz Israel during this century bears this out.

Many a time throughout the prophetic scriptures God promises a second regathering of the people to their land in the latter days, from which they will never again be uprooted (Isaiah 11:11-14; Jeremiah 16:14-16; 30:3; Amos 9:14-15 etc). The promise of this regathering specifically includes Judea and Samaria (Jeremiah 31:5,23-24). It is noteworthy that the first reference to the land made in the New Testament is in the term "the land of Israel" (Matthew 2:21).

To the Christian who believes that God's promise to Abraham and his descendants is unchanging, and that the prophetic scriptures are still valid today, the Biblical right of the Jewish people to the whole land of Israel cannot be questioned.

HISTORICALLY

It is not adequately realised that, despite dispersion, there has been a continuous Jewish presence in the land of Israel for at least 3,000 years, right down to the present time. Although the number of Jewish inhabitants has varied constantly, this has been because of circumstances outside Jewish control, and has always been as large as conditions allowed at any one time.

For instance, at the close of the fifteenth century the number of Jews in Safed had grown to 20-30,000, and in the neighbouring Galilean countryside at least ten Jewish villages were occupied with agriculture.

It is a popular misconception that all the Jews who survived the destruction of 70 AD went into exile, and that their descendants did not begin to return until 1800 years later. James Parkes, a Christian scholar, writes: “(The Zionists’) real title deeds were written by the heroic endurance of those who had maintained a Jewish presence in the Land through the centuries, and in spite of every discouragement.” (*Whose Land? A History of the Peoples of Palestine* London 1970 p.266)

Regarding the claims of some Palestinian Arabs that the land has belonged to them for 1300 years, the words of Samuel Katz are a good commentary:

There was never a “Palestinian Arab” nation. To the Arab people as a whole, no such entity as Palestine existed. To those of them who lived in its neighbourhood, its lands were a suitable object for plunder and destruction. Those few who lived within its bounds may have had an affinity for their village (and made war on the next village), for their clan (which fought for the right of local tax-gathering), or even for their town.

They were not conscious of any relationship to a land, and even the townsmen would have heard of its existence as a land, if they heard of it at all, only from such Jews as they might meet. (Palestine is mentioned only once in the Koran, as the “Holy Land” - holy, that is, to Jews and Christians).

The feeling of so many nineteenth-century visitors that the country had been waiting for the return of its lawful inhabitants was made the more significant by the shallowness of the Arab imprint on the country. In twelve hundred years of association, they built only a single town, Ramleh, established as the local sub-provincial capital in the eighth century.

The researches of nineteenth-century scholars, beginning with the archaeologist Edward Robinson in 1838, revealed that hundreds of place names of villages and sites, seemingly Arab, were Arabic renderings or translations of ancient Hebrew names, Biblical or Talmudic.

“The Arabs have never even had a name of their own for this country which they claim. Filastin is merely the Arab transliteration of Palestine, the name the Romans gave the

country (in 135 AD) when they determined to obliterate the presence of the Jewish people.” (*The Jewish Presence in Palestine* p.35)

(It is worth pointing out that many Bibles include a map entitled “Palestine in the Time of Christ”, yet in fact during the time of Jesus it was known as “The Land of Israel”, and only received the name “Palestine” at the hand of the Romans some 100 years later).

It should also be noted that Jerusalem has never been the capital of an Arab state. Even during the 19 years of Jordanian occupation of Judea and Samaria, including the Old City, (1948-1967), Jerusalem was never declared the capital of a Palestinian entity.

LEGALLY

For Christians who accept the Biblical world view, God is sovereign over the nations, including their history, rulers and destiny, of which He is also judge (Psalm 22:28). Biblical history has many examples of God’s sovereignty over gentile rulers, of which Cyrus is a notable example (Ezra 1). It is especially important to note that God determines both the geographical boundaries of nations and the duration of their national existence (Acts 17:26), and also that God disposes and deals with nations with reference to His purposes for Israel and Jerusalem (Deut 32:8; Ezekiel 5:5).

The establishment of the state of Israel was by the decree of the nations (of which God is the Lord), and not by war or terrorism.

- 1878 - After the Russia/Turkey War, the Berlin Congress of Nations gave full civil rights to the Jews of Palestine.
- 1917 - After the conquest of Palestine in World War 1, (previously part of the Turkish Empire), the British government, after close consultation between the allies, issued the Balfour Declaration on November 2nd in which she declared: “His Majesty’s government views with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people...”
- 1922 - The mandate for Palestine was granted to Britain at the Allied Supreme Council Meeting in San Remo in April 1920, and was confirmed by the League of Nations in 1922. The Mandate stated that Britain should “be responsible for placing the country (Palestine) under such political, administrative and economic conditions as will secure the establishment of the Jewish National Home...”

The separation of Transjordan from the terms of the Mandate by Britain in 1922/3 was illegal and in contravention of the agreed terms of the Mandate (Article V). Britain also contravened Article VI in forbidding Jewish settlement in Transjordan.