

WHOSE LAND?

- 1947 - The United Nations voted for the partition of Palestine into a Jewish state and an Arab state. When the British administration withdrew in May 1948, the Jews accepted the opportunity. The Arabs rejected it and declared war on the new Jewish state with the aim of securing the whole land for themselves. They lost that war and were left with the 1948 ceasefire lines, and an Arab refugee problem.
- 1949 – The State of Israel was accepted as a member of the United Nations.

The Arab rejection of the validity of the Balfour Declaration and of the internationally recognised legal basis for the Jewish state is therefore a rejection of the sovereignty of God. That rejection is especially serious for Arab Christians.

The existence of these biblical, historical, and legal rights of the Jewish people to the land of Israel does not negate the normal rights of the existing Arab population of the land. Nor does it become a basis on which to deny Arabs any rights in the land some have lived in for many years. 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. That is common in the internal conduct of benevolent nations and between such nations. Israel's dilemma is how to square these conflicting claims. The state has done far better than the rest of the world cares to recognise. It currently has an Arab minority of around 2 million people, 21 percent of the population.

SOME FINAL OBSERVATIONS

The fundamental issue today is that Islamists are contending at every level against the Jewish people's biblical, historical, and legal rights to the land of Israel as their national possession and homeland. Sadly, the Palestinian occupants of Judea, Samaria and the Gaza Strip have become pawns of this powerful spiritual/political struggle. The frequency with which Arabs who are suspected of moderation or any wish to co-exist peaceably with Israel have been assassinated by fellow Arabs indicates the true nature and intentions of Islamic extremist forces arrayed against Israel.

The original text by Derek White has been updated in February 2024.

CFI Communications, PO Box 2687, Eastbourne, BN22 7LZ

Tel: 01323 410810 email: info@cfi.org.uk website: www.cfi.org.uk

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

God is sovereign over the nations (Acts 17:26). If he has chosen both the land and people of Israel for his redemptive purposes, it is an extremely serious matter when the nations, and especially the Church, deny that choice.

Therefore, 'WHOSE LAND?' is a fundamental question. The answer we choose will have a major influence upon our interpretation of past and present events.

BIBLICALLY

Biblically the territory known as Israel includes Judea and Samaria and belongs to the Jewish people. God made a covenant with Abraham giving 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). The Arab claim that the land also belongs to them by divine promise is unfounded. While Ishmael is certainly blessed by God, the covenant is with his younger brother 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 people's "own land" (Ezekiel 36:17, 24; 37:21). 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 the land of Israel in recent decades 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). Note that the first reference to the land in the New Testament is as "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 is certain.

HISTORICALLY

Many people do not realise 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. The number of Jewish inhabitants has varied continuously because of circumstances outside their control. It has always been as large as conditions allowed at any one time.

For instance, at the close of the 15th century the number of Jews in Safed had grown to between 20,000 and 30,000. 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 AD 70 went into exile, and that their descendants did not begin to return until the 1880s. 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 1,300 years, the words of Samuel Katz in his book *‘Battleground: Fact and Fantasy in Palestine’* 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 19th 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 1,200 years of association, they built only a single town, Ramleh, established as the local sub-provincial capital in the 8th century.

The research of 19th century scholars, starting with archaeologist Edward Robinson in 1838, revealed that hundreds of place names of villages and sites that seemed to be Arab, were Arabic renderings or translations of ancient Hebrew names.

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

It is worth noting that many Bibles include a map entitled “Palestine in the Time of Christ”. In fact, it was known as “The Land of Israel” during the time of Jesus 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, Samaria, and the Old City of Jerusalem, it was never declared as the capital of a Palestinian entity.

LEGALLY

For Christians who accept the biblical worldview, God is sovereign over the nations, including their history, rulers, and destiny (Psalm 22:28). Biblical history has many examples of God’s sovereignty over gentile rulers, Cyrus being 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). He also disposes and deals with nations with reference to his purposes for Israel and Jerusalem (Deuteronomy 32:8; Ezekiel 5:5, Isaiah 60:12).

The establishment of the state of Israel was by the decree of the nations (of which God is the Lord). It was 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 - During the capture of Palestine from the Ottoman Empire in World War One, the British government consulted with its allies and issued the Balfour Declaration on 2nd November, declaring: “His Majesty’s government views with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people ...”
- 1920 - 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 under such political, administrative and economic conditions as will secure the establishment of the Jewish National Home ...”
- 1921 - In a move designed to favour the Arabs who had helped Britain defeat the Ottoman Turks, the British separated the mandate area east of the Jordan river and called it Transjordan. That decision was contrary to the agreed terms of the mandate (Article V) and the British also contravened Article VI of the mandate by forbidding Jewish settlement in Transjordan.
- 1936 - Arab resentment in the remaining ‘Palestine’ erupted in a general strike and terrorist attacks against Jews and the British, prompting the Peel Commission to recommend setting up separate states. But the British did not implement the recommendation, thinking that it impractical.