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# ZIONISTS

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A Criticism of the Claim that the Establishment  
of an Independent Jewish State  
in Palestine is Prophesied in Holy Scripture

*Alfred*  
By PROFESSOR GUILLAUME

Professor of Old Testament Studies in the University of  
London, formerly Professor of Oriental Languages in the  
University of Durham, author of various works on the Old  
Testament and Islamic studies.

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801 2nd Avenue, Room 801  
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I wish to make it plain at the outset that my remarks are directed to one aspect of Zionist claims - the claim to fulfill scripture by the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine - and must not be interpreted in any other way or be taken to prejudice the claim of the Jews to be allowed to make a home in Palestine.

To a superficial reader it well might seem that a divine promise to give a land to a particular people made some four thousand years ago and often repeated constituted that people owners of that land by divine right. Now if this is the Jewish title to Palestine it must be carefully scrutinised. Accordingly I propose to examine a few texts which are familiar to all practising Jews, and which have profoundly influenced some Christian bodies, particularly in America.

The points which are of importance are (1) to whom were the promises made? (2) What was the extent of the land which was promised? And (3) was the promise irrevocable or was it subject to any conditions?

### (1) TO WHOM WERE THE PROMISES MADE!

The first explicit promise of Palestine to the descendants of Abraham was at Shechem (now Nablus) in Genesis xii, 7: 'Unto thy seed will I give this land.' Ch. xiii, 15, when Abraham is standing on a hill near Bethel, has the words: 'all the land which thou seest to thee will I give it and to thy seed for ever.' ch. xv, 18 is more explicit: 'Unto thy seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates.' The promises are repeated to Isaac; and to Jacob in xxviii, 12: 'the land where-on thou liest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed, and thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth and thou shalt spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south; and in thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed.' When Abraham made a covenant with God through circumcision (xvii, 8) all the land of Canaan was promised to him as 'an everlasting possession.' Other passages might be quoted, but these are representative, and others add nothing that is relevant here.

Now it is generally supposed that these promises were made to the Jews, and to the Jews alone. But that is not what the Bible says. The word 'to thy seed' inevitably include Arabs, both Muslims and Christians, who can claim descent from Abraham through his son Ishmael. (Here we are not concerned with the Muslim tradition that Abraham was once at Meccah and left Ishmael there). Ishmael was the reputed father of a large number of Arab tribes, and Genesis records that Abraham became the father of many north Arabian tribes through his concubine Keturah. It cannot be argued that the words of Gen. xxi, 10-12, necessarily cancel the promises made to Abraham's seed as a whole: (Sarah) said to Abraham, Cast out this bondwoman and her son: for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son Isaac. And the thing was very grievous in Abraham's sight on account of his son. And God said unto Abraham, Let it not be grievous in thy sight because of the lad, and because of thy bondwoman; in all that Sarah saith unto thee, hearken unto her voice: for in Isaac shall seed be called unto thee. And also of the son of the bondwoman will I make a nation, because he is thy seed.' It is true that henceforth among the descendants of Isaac 'the seed of Abraham' was taken to mean the Israelites; but from the beginning it was not so, and the descendants of Ishmael had every-right to call and consider themselves of the seed of Abraham.

Moreover, when the covenant of circumcision was made with Abraham (Gen. xvii) and the land of Canaan was promised as 'an everlasting possession,' it was Ishmael who was circumcised: Isaac had not then been born.

From this brief study of the divine promise to the descendants of Abraham we see that the first promise necessarily included all the descendants of Ishmael; but that afterwards in the time of Isaac and Jacob the promise was narrowed to their descendants, though not in such a way as to exclude explicitly their Arab brethren; and it is well known that many Arabs accompanied Moses and Joshua into Palestine when the country was partially occupied; and not a little of Moses' success was due to the kindness and hospitality of Jethro the Midianite, who was of course an Arab and Moses' father-in-law.

## (2) EXTENT OF THE PROMISED LAND

The second question as to what was the extent of 'The Promised Land' is a little difficult to determine. The passages quoted under (1) begin with a vague reference to 'this land' from the starting point of Shechem (Nablus), and go on to include all the area from 'the river of Egypt' to the Euphrates; the third passage speaks of Abraham's descendants spreading out in all four directions. Here, again, it is important to note that the promise of dominion from Nile to Euphrates was made before the birth of Ishmael and before the birth of Isaac, so that this territory was not to be necessarily and exclusively Israelite; and save for the short period when Solomon's authority was recognised in this area (I Kings iv, 21) it has always been in the possession of the Arabs.

Looking again at Gen xiii, 15, it is clear that Transjordan was included in the promise to Abraham, because it would be plainly visible from the hill at Bethel; but this promise again predates the birth of Ishmael and Isaac, and so cannot be held to constitute an exclusively Israelite claim to the territory on the other side of the Jordan.

However, in the Book of Deuteronomy Moses told the people that God had commanded them to go in and occupy the country from the Mediterranean in the west to the Euphrates in the east, and from the Negeb in the south to the Lebanon in the north. These instructions the Israelites did not, or could not, carry out. They could not occupy the coast land which the Philistines held, and they never possessed the ports or the hinterland of Phoenicia. Some centuries later in the reign of David, they did gain possession of Damascus, and David entered into a treaty of friendship with Hiram, king of Tyre; so that when Solomon held a great service of dedication when the temple building was completed deputies came from as far north as the region of Hama and from the south as far as the modern El-'Arish. But before Solomon's reign had ended much of David's empire had returned to its former possessors. Everyone is aware that the process of attrition went on until the kingdom of Judea was confined to a few hundred square miles of land round Jerusalem, and even this was lost to the Babylonians in 597 B. C.

### (3) WAS THE PROMISE IRREVOCABLE?

It will have been observed that two of the passages quoted under (1) use the words 'for ever' and 'everlasting' of what is to be a future Israelite occupation of Palestine. The same word stands for both the English renderings in the Hebrew original; and 'everlasting' is not the proper meaning. The word ('olam) means 'a long time,' 'antiquity,' 'futuraity,' and we read of 'days of old,' 'waste places of old,' 'gates of old,' 'from of old,' and similar expressions, all of which employ this word rendered above 'for ever,' or 'everlasting.' Again, a psalmist says: 'I will sing for ever,' an expression which the most literal interpreter of Holy Scripture can hardly suppose to be the literal meaning!

Thus, summing up the evidence so far adduced, one is forced to the conclusion that the land of Palestine was not originally promised to the Jews exclusively, and that the first promise was indefinite ('this land') and was subsequently enlarged to include Transjordan, Syria, the Lebanon, and the nomad's land as far as the Euphrates. Lastly we see that there never was an unconditional promise of an everlasting possession; though a long and indefinite period was intended.

We are now led to a stage of history and prophecy which bear more directly on current misunderstandings of Hebrew prediction. Had we no prophetic messages to guide us it would be apparent that these promises of possession of the land of Canaan were not unconditional: the covenant relation between Israel and God demanded loyalty from the people, and individual and corporate righteousness. Were the people to fail in these respects a terrible doom awaited them. The following words spoken by Moses in the 28th ch. of Deuteronomy apply in parts so easily to the sufferings of Jewry in the past few years that many have seen in them a prophecy of our own times: "It shall come to pass if thou wilt not hearken unto the voice of the Lord thy God to observe to do all his commandments and his statutes which I command thee this day; that all these curses shall come upon thee and shall overtake thee. . . And the Lord shall scatter you among the peoples, from the one end of the earth; and there thou shalt serve other gods, which thou hast

not known, thou nor thy fathers, even wood and stone. And among these nations shalt thou find no ease, and there shall be no rest for the sole of thy foot; but the Lord shall give thee there a trembling heart and failing of eyes, and pining of soul: and thy life shall hang in doubt before thee . . . ”

Here it is clear that the divine promises to the patriarchs have been annulled by the national apostasy; and when the Assyrian captivity removed the population of Samaria, and the Babylonian captivity the people of Judah, the prophets saw in the disasters a vindication of the divine justice on a disobedient and gainsaying people.

But they taught their people that a remnant would return, and would restore the temple and the religious life of the community; and they looked forward to a time when the earth would be filled with the knowledge of the Lord. It is often forgotten that these men were inspired poets who mingled very practical matters like the Return from the Babylonian Exile with sublime pictures of the desert blossoming as the rose, the lion lying down with the lamb, men beating their swords into pruning hooks, and forsaking and forswearing war for ever. They also prophesied of the setting up of the kingdom of David.

Unhappily, the practical was fulfilled and the ideal remained an ideal. Owing to the fact that the things that religious men yearn for were not realised when the Jews returned to Palestine there has been a tendency in the past to interpret not only the eschatological passages in the prophets but also the practical and political prophecies, of some time in the future; and as all prophecies in the Old Testament necessarily and inevitably centre round the Jewish people and their relation to God, the Golden Age is inseparable from the Holy City inhabited by holy Israelites. It would seem to be the hope of some that if the Jews could be returned to Palestine and form a state the Golden Age would, in some mysterious way, appear on earth.

But such views are a distortion of the Old Testament prophecies which predicted a return from Babylon and from all the lands whither the Jews had been exiled. And these prophe-

cies were fulfilled. The Jews did return to Judea, they did rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, and they did rebuild the temple; and after fluctuating fortunes they did secure a brief period of political independence and expansion under the Maccabbees. Thus the prophecies of the Return have been fulfilled, and they cannot be fulfilled again. Within the canonical literature of the Old Testament there is no prophecy of a second return after the return from the Babylonian Exile; because (a) after the Exile all the Jews who wished to do so had returned to the Holy Land, though a great many more preferred to remain where they were and formed the Diaspora which afterwards became the backbone of the Christian Church; and (b) the last of the prophets died centuries before the destruction of Jerusalem in A. D. 70.

It would be possible to criticize the claim that Scripture prophesies Jewish supremacy in Palestine from the point of view of the Higher Criticism of the Old Testament; but this has been intentionally ignored; and the Bible has been left to speak for itself.

Again, it would be possible to use the New Testament argument that the Church is now the Israel of God; but this seems inadvisable. This short study is in no sense a polemic; but a brief examination of what the Old Testament says on matters in which its authority has been evoked.



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