

ISSN 2072-3334
Development Compilation
Vol. 06. No. 01. December 2011

THE LAND OF PALESTINE IN HISTORY

Dr. Md. Harun-or-Rashid*

Abstract: Before The Muslim conquest Palestine was over run and administered by a number of dynasts and conquerors. Throughout the period socio-economic and demographic changes took place. Palestine came under the Arab Muslims during the Caliphate of Hazrat Umar in 637. It remained so for centuries together with a little break. With the passage of time, it came under the Mamluks of Egypt. In 1517 Ottoman Turks conquered Palestine and it remained four centuries under their control until 1917. The Allied powers i.e. the British occupied it during the First World War. The British officially involved after the First World War with the publication of Balfore Declaration 1917. From that time the Palestine is the complex and controversial issue.

The area of Palestine may perhaps best be defined, by extending it from the Mediterranean on the west to the Arabian Desert on the east; and from the lower Litani (Leontes) River in the north to the Gaza Valley in the south. Its northern and southern limits would thus correspond roughly with the proverbial extent of the Holy Land, from Dan to Beersheba.

The area is small, about 150 mi. long and 80 mi, wide, but its strategic importance is immense as though it passes the main roads from Egypt to Syria and from the Mediterranean to the hills beyond the Jordan. On a broad view, Palestine incorporates a part of the high edge of the Arabian Plateau and it contains some chief physical features which are distinct from place to place. Palestine consequently includes a number of regions of very distinct geographical character.

The Land of Palestine is situated in west Asia. The term of 'Palestine' is the Greek version of 'Phalestina', and was the name of only "a part of the coast, and thence spread inland to the desert". The original home of the Philistines may still be in doubt; as to whether did they hail from Crete or

Cyprus. They give evidence of being a maritime people, perhaps un-Semitic. Whichever island they came from, the Philistines seem to have arrived on the coasts of the Land of Canaan about the same time as the Israelites were arriving after crossing the desert.¹ Palestine is really "the north or north-western end of the great Arabian Peninsula, of which they call the southern end" the *Yemen*. Hence, the other direction came to be called *Sham* – the former on the right, the latter on the left. But there came a time when *Philistia* encroached on *Sham*, while ultimately the Philistines succeeded in giving their name to the whole land mass lying between the border of Egypt – to which their Gaza has always been gateway—and south of a line drawn roughly from Sidon to Damascus. These Philistines must have been known to other tribes early in Near Eastern history. The Assyrians were aware of the *Pilistu* (or *Palastu*). The adjective seems to have the meaning of 'stranger', occurring several times in I Maccabees, with 'Philistines' in the text and 'strangers' in the margin of the Revised Version.² The term is not of Semitic origin, though some have tried to discover a triliteral root. But probably 'Philistine' is the name they gave themselves on their migration from Caphtor, according to a tradition common to Deuteronomy and the book of Amos.³ Careful consideration of the details points to the origin of this people being Mediterranean, using Egypt as a corridor to the shore lands of Canaan, along a route perhaps not far from where the railway came to be built nearly half a century ago.⁴ Deuteronomy says that they destroyed the inhabitants of villages as far as Gaza and "dwelt in their stead".⁵ The Philistines thus did from one direction of invasion very much what the Israelites did from another, including (for them) a 'Semitization' from the local inhabitants, linguistically and perhaps religiously. The Israelites, too, tended to "yield to the manner of the gods of the land"⁶—and with far less reason and excuse than the Philistines.

In connection with this some words of George Adam Smith in 1894 may be summed up

the strange parallel which (Philistine history) affords to the history of Israel... Both Philistines and Hebrews were immigrants into the land for whose possession they fought through centuries. Both came up to it from Egypt. Both absorbed the populations they found on it. Both succeeded to the Canaanite civilization, and came under the fascination of the Canaanite religion. Each people had a distinctive character of his own, and both were at different periods so victorious that either humanly speaking, might have swallowed up the other. Indeed, so fully was the Philistine identified with the land that *his name has for ever become its name* a distinction which Israel never reached.⁷

* Associate Professor, Department of Islamic History and Culture, Rajshahi University, Rajshahi-6205.

There may be further comparisons and contrasts today to be added to the judgments of George Adam Smith, but the issue for the moment is confined to the conclusion that 'his name has for ever become its name. It is true that the other Old Testament references are scanty. The song of Moses mentions that "pangs have taken hold on the inhabitation of Philistia ("Palestina" in the A.V).⁸ First Isaiah has an oracle, with two reference, very much in anticipation of an Assyrian invasion, and (somewhat unlike the current situation) offering a refuge in Zion for the afflicted inhabitants of Philistia.⁹ This is a distinct advance on the outlook of the Books of Samuel, and in some quarters of more modern times. The other 'prophetical allusion' is in Joel 3:4 as clear a decline from Isaiah of Jerusalem as the references in Ezekiel,¹⁰ which betray the more ordinary Semitic attitude of recompense and revenge.

Over and above its geographical location at the junction of two continents, almost of three, Palestine has been made the corridor of armies and the outpost of empires, Egyptian, Assyrian, Persian, Greek and Roman, apart from the galaxy of smaller nations, Hivites, Hittites, Perizzites and all the rest, making its international debut at the dawn of recorded history. Palestine alone of the Near eastern countries has the right to be called "the land of three faiths". There were per-monotheistic cultures in the country antedating the arrival both of the Israelites and the Philistines.

Thus it is to be noted that the land of Palestine is highly esteemed for its being the sacred place of three major monotheistic religions of the world - Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Jesus Christ lived and taught there. Palestine was named after the Philistines who captured the southern coastal part of the country in the 12th century B.C. The area, first called Philistia, gave its name in the second century A.D. to Syria Palestina, the southern portion of the Roman province of Syria. The name Palestine was revived as an official title when the British were given a mandate for the government of the country after its release from Turkish rule during the First World War.¹¹

Being situated on the East Coast of the Mediterranean and West Jordan and to the south of Lebanon, the territory of Palestine covers around 10,435 square miles of land area. The rest is water, half of the Dead Sea. No accurate official census is available. But it is said that at the end of the 1918 there were 700,000 people living in Palestine. They were divided into 574,000 Muslims, 70,000 Christians, and 56,000 Jews. Almost all the Palestinian Christians are Arabs while the rest Jews. In

between 1800 and 1945 the Jewish populations of Palestine increased from approximately 25,000 to 600,000. Finally it has crossed 33 percent of the country's populations.

It has also been said that the name of Palestine is derived from the Philistines who lived in the southern coastal part of the country in the 12th century B.C. In the 20th century B.C. the Canaanites started to settle in the plains and on the coast. Gradually they developed their own culture. In the Bible the country is called the land of Canaan.¹² The Palestine Arabs are the actual inhabitants of Palestine. The Moslem Arab conquest of Palestine in A.D. 637 was not the starting point of their occupation of the country. The Arabs are a pre-Islamic people. They lived in Palestine and other parts of the Middle East before the advent of Islam. In fact, the number of the invaders at the time of Moslem Arab conquest of Palestine in the seventh century was small and the indigenous inhabitants assimilated them.¹³

In addition there lived in Palestine the Canaanites and the Philistines. The former belonged to the Semitic race, and probably came from Arabian Desert, the original homeland of the Semites. The latter's ethnic origin is not known, but they came from the southern part of Asia Minor and from certain Mediterranean islands chiefly Crete. After the Canaanites and the Philistines, the Hebrews ruled over Palestine. The times of the Canaanites, the Philistines and the Hebrews were the golden age of the ancient civilization of Palestine.

It is necessary at the outset to correct a current misconception. The Israelis were not the earliest inhabitants of Palestine. They were invaders.¹⁴ Palestine for some centuries was under the domination of the Semitic-speaking Canaanites who came in contact with the neighbouring Babylonians. The Hittites and the Egyptians nourished a rich culture. In course of time their culture became more prosperous as a result of their mixing with the Philistines and the Hebrews. In conformity with the opinion of historians that the original homeland of the Hebrews was the desert of Arabia, one of their groups left the desert to settle in the north-west of Mesopotamia - the land between the Tigris and the Euphrates. About 1800 B.C. the Hebrews under their leader Abraham left Mesopotamia and came to Palestine to settle there.¹⁵

Ismail, son of Abraham, stayed in Arabia, and Ishaq another son, settled in Palestine. Under the leadership of Ishaq's son Yaqub a branch of the Hebrews started making habitation in Palestine. In the Bible Yaqub is known as Jacob. His another name is Israel. After the name Israel his followers are known as the Banu Israel or the Israelites (children of Israel).¹⁶

Yaqub's favourite son Yusuf, as a result of his stepbrother's conspiracy had to leave Palestine for Egypt. Rayyan bin-Walid, Pharaoh of Egypt, appointed him the treasurer of the kingdom for his acumen in financial matters.¹⁷ About 1600 B.C. an appreciable number of the famine hit Hebrews of Palestine which made their habitation in Egypt. The oppression of the Pharaohs drove them to slavery. They had to bear the oppression of the ruling power for long. After much suffering they found in Musa a deliverer who took them to Sinai Peninsula about 1300 B.C.¹⁸ Musa was a prophet and preacher of monotheism. In the Bible he is known as Moses. By his eloquent speeches he succeeded in uniting the different tribes of the Hebrews. These people, later on, played a vital role in the conquest of Palestine. After Musa's death misfortune befell on the Hebrews as the former did not leave any capable person to take the leadership.

The occupation of Palestine was the long-cherished desire of the Hebrews. To them Palestine was their promised land flowing with milk and honey. They tried several times to occupy Palestine, but they failed to capture any important place of the country except some arid valleys due to the strong opposition of the Canaanites. During this time they faced another and far more dangerous enemy - the Philistines, who coming from southern Asia Minor and some Mediterranean islands, occupied the country. As valiant warriors they drove the Hebrews to hilly regions. To combat all these adverse situations they forgot their internal dissension and stood united against the common foes. About 1205 B.C., a war broke out between the Hebrews led by Talut, and the Philistines headed by Jalut. In course of the war when it was undecided Daud, a young chap entered the battle field and turned the tide in favour of the Hebrews. Jalut was killed by him. As a result the whole Palestine came under the control of the Hebrews and their leader Talut became their king for the first time in their history. In the Bible and in the annals of European history Talut is known as Saul.¹⁹

During Saul's reign the scattered Hebrew tribes got united and they gained every strength to defend their country against external forces. His daughter was married to Daud. After Saul's death his son-in-law Daud inherited the ruler ship of Palestine in 10th century B.C. In the accounts of European historians he is known as David.²⁰ He was a prophet, warrior and political leader. He united the Hebrew tribes into a strong nation, made Jerusalem his capital and speedily subjugated the Philistines. A promising kingdom was now established, the strongest in the region of Palestine-Syria Daud ruled for long 40 years.

Palestine reached the height of its glory during the reign of David's son, Sulayman who became king in 935 B.C.²¹ Sulayman was also a prophet and he was famous for his wit, sharp intelligence, uncommon wisdom and fair justice. Under his able leadership Palestine's political authority extended to Mediterranean in the west and Yemen in the south. He divided his kingdom into twelve districts for effective administration and for breaking the tribal boundaries. By this measure he intended to lessen the clannish separatism of the tribes, and to unite them into one people.²²

He also raised forts and stationed garrisons at strategic points of his realm to check external invasion and internal revolt. He took special interest in the material prosperity of his kingdom. He became one of the leading patrons of trade in the Near East. In the Red Sea, he owned a fleet of mercantile vessels in partnership with the Phoenician king, Hirman of Tyre.²³ Under him Jerusalem became one of the busiest markets of the Near East and he was the richest potentates of his time. Living in oriental luxuries, he loved display and built in his capital Jerusalem a magnificent palace for himself and splendid temple of Jehovah, the God of the Hebrews.²⁴ Sulayman's fame as a great king reached far and wide. He compelled and directed Queen Bilqis, ruler of Saba (Sheba in the Bible) of Yemen to acknowledge his authority and to accept the oneness of God. During this time Sulayman's authority was established in Yemen. After the death of Sulayman the glory of Hebrew kingdom of Palestine passed away. His weak successors could not maintain the solidarity of the kingdom. Towards the close of his son Rohbon's 17 years reign all the Hebrew tribes except Juda and Benjamin rose in rebellion and set up to the north of Jerusalem a rival kingdom, with Banu Amin as its first king.

This northern kingdom, of which Samaria afterwards became the capital, was known as the kingdom of Israel. The south of which Jerusalem remained the capital was called the kingdom of Judah and its first king was Sulayman's grand son Abyab.²⁵

The northern Hebrew kingdom, Israel, came to an end in 722 B.C., when the Assyrian king Sargon II captured its capital Samaria and carried away 10 influential tribes of Israel into captivity. They are known as the lost ten Tribes of the Hebrews. The southern kingdom, Judah, was wiped out of its existence by Bhakhte Nasr (Nabucadnezzar), king of Babylon (604-561 B.C.).²⁶ He forced the Hebrews to conclude a treaty with him. It was agreed in the treaty that the Hebrews would rule their country and would pay tribute to Nabucadnezzar and allow a representative of him at their capital, Jerusalem. The treaty did not last long, since a certain Hebrew one day killed the royal representative. In retaliation, Nebucadnezzar attacked

Jerusalem, razed it to the ground, killed a large part of its population and carried away the rest into Babylonian captivity.²⁷ Jerusalem became a ruined and desolate city. One day Jerusalem became a populous and prosperous city. By this time Nebucadnezzar died and Babylon came under the control of the Persian king Cyrus.

Cyrus was kind to the Hebrews. He set them free from their Babylonian captivity, allowed them to return to Jerusalem and under his direct care Jerusalem speedily regained its lost prosperity. Under Cyrus and other rulers of his dynasty, Jerusalem, nay the whole of Palestine was a Persian protectorate. Persian Suzerainty over the Palestine ended when the Greek emperor Alexander conquered it in 332 B.C. After the fall of Greeks Palestine came under Roman rule in 63 B.C. As the Hebrews revolted against Roman rule and as they oppressed and killed Hazrat Isa (Jesus in the Bible), the Roman governor of Palestine in 40 A.D. plundered Jerusalem, killed many Hebrews and drove the rest out of the country. During this time the Hebrew Kingdom of Palestine came to an end and it became a province of the Roman Empire. Following the Jewish rebellion against the Romans, Titus destroyed Jerusalem in 70 A.D. From the 4th until the 7th century of Christian era, Palestine came under the Christian influence. Emperor Constantine I built the Church of the Holy Sepulcher.²⁸ The king of Persia invaded the country and captured Jerusalem in 614 A.D. In 628 Heraclius of Byzantine (Romans) recovered Palestine and subsequently restored the True Cross to Jerusalem. In 637 the Arab Muslims Conquered Palestine and their rule and domination sustained till 1558 A.D with a little break. Then it came under the Mamluks. In 1517 Ottoman Turks conquered Palestine and its remained four centuries under their control until 1917 A.D. When the Allied powers i.e. the British occupied it during the First World War.

Under the Ottomans, the Jews were organized and they appealed to handover Palestine to them. In continuation of this endeavour, in 1882 a Bilu group (a group of Russian Jews) in Constantinople issued a manifesto demanding a home in Palestine.²⁹ They proposed that they should beg it from the Sultan of Turkey, in whose empire Palestine laid. In 1897 Theodore Herzl found and advocated for an autonomous Jewish state at the Baste congress. He recognized as the founder of political Zionism. At Baste programme in Switzerland (1897) Jewish sentiment and awareness of nationalism was to be strengthened, and efforts were to be made to raise the necessary funds for achieving the Zionist movement that grew up of this congress. By the outbreak of First World War, Zionism had grown from Herzl's visionary idea to a strong, organized world-wide movement.³⁰ In 1902 Herzl met with Jews Multi - millionaire Lord Rosch

Child. They decided that under the British flag Jews colony would be established in Palestine. In 1903 Zionists united in their six Congress and determined to create a Jewish state whose name would be Palestine. When the Turkish Empire was destroyed by Allied forces in the 1914-18 war new possibilities of getting there 'home' or state in Palestine opened up before the Zionists. In the years 1915-16 Husain-McMahon Correspondence encouraged the Arab nationalists to hope that at end of the First World War, they would consider a greater Arab kingdom and Palestine was to be internationalized. The expectation was disappointed for a result of the Sykes - Picot agreement. In October 1916 Zionists submitted a memorandum to the British government for getting a dwelling land in Palestine.

Influential Zionists, notably Dr. Chaim Weizmann, saw their opportunity to press Britain for a commitment to provide a home for the Jews in Palestine and secured the help of Judge Louis Brandeis, a leading United States Zionist and principal adviser to President Woodrow Wilson, in bringing the U.S. into the war on the side of the Allies in April 1917. In November 1917 Arthur Balfour, British Secretary of State for foreign affairs, addressed a letter to Lord Rothschild, promising British support for the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jews people on the understanding that nothing shall be done which may be prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine.³¹ Jerusalem was captured by British forces under the command of Gen. Sir Edmund Allenby in December 1917 and the rest of the country was occupied by the British by October 1918. A British military administration was set up after the capture of Jerusalem and general international framework existed for Britain in article 22 of the covenant of the League of Nations signed in June 1919. This article recognized the provisional independence of the former Ottoman Arab provinces subject to the assistance of the mandatory power in whose selection the wishes of the communities themselves were to be consulted. In July 1919 a General Syrian Congress, held in Damascus and attended by Palestinian delegates passed resolution electing Amir Faisal, son of Husain, king of a united Syria (including Palestine) and rejecting the Balfour Declaration. King Faisal was, however, deposed by the French in July 1920.

The British involvement in Palestine with the publication of Balfour Declaration, the Jewish immigration thereafter with the avowed aim of establishing a state and Arab opposition led to the acceleration of bad relationship and emergence of the Palestine Problem, the controversial and complex one in the history of the World.

Notes & References

- ¹ The balance of opinion seems to veer towards Crete, possibly in closer text with Egypt. The inhabitants of a place near Gaza called 'Jabalia' are obviously not pure Arab, and till the end of the Mandate cut off, the only method of visiting being riding through sand, inches deep.
- ² Cf. George Adam Smith, *Atlas of the Historical Geography of the Holy Land* (London: Hodder, 1st edn, 1894), p. 169 n. *Hasting's Dictionary of the Bible*, III, 844.
- ³ Deuteronomy 2:23. Amos 9:7. Cf. Jeremiah 47:4.
- ⁴ "They moved up the coast from Egypt". G.A. Smith, p. 171. But this does not mean an Egyptian origin.
- ⁵ Deuteronomy 2:23.
- ⁶ The prophets having to deal with the tendency to follow pagan cults.
- ⁷ G.A. Smith, pp. 175 f.
- ⁸ Exodus 15:14
- ⁹ Isaiah 14:29 ff.
- ¹⁰ The Ezekiel references (25:15 f) are to the philistines, not to Philistia.
- ¹¹ *Encyclopaedia of Britannica*, Vol. 19, p. 155.
- ¹² Henry, Culston LLM. *Palestine, the Arabs and Israel*, Longmans, 1969, London, p. 3.
- ¹³ *Ibid*, p. 6.
- ¹⁴ Henry Cattan, LLM *op.cit.*, p. 3.
- ¹⁵ Will Durant, our oriental Heritage, Vol.1 (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954), pp. 300-301: James Henry Breasted, *Ancient time A History of the early world* (Chicago: The oriental institute, the University of Chicago, n.d.), p. 226.
- ¹⁶ Abu al Fida, *Kitab al-Mukhtasar fi Akhbar al-Bashar*, Vol. I (Bayrat, Dar Lebanonia, n.d.), p. 23.
- ¹⁷ Al-Quran, Surah al-Baqarah, 46.
- ¹⁸ Will Durant, *op.cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 300-302.
- ¹⁹ Will Durant, *op.cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 304-305.
- ²⁰ Henry S. Lucas, *A Short History of Civilization* (Washington Magraw-Hill Book Company, 1953), p. 86.
- ²¹ Al-Yaqubi, *Tarikh-al-Yaqubi*, Vol. I (Bayrat: Dar Sador, 1960), pp. 57-59.
- ²² Will Durant, *op.cit.*, Vol. I, p. 306.
- ²³ Will Durant, *op.cit.*, Vol. I, p. 306.
- ²⁴ T.W. Wall Bank and A.M. Taytor, *Civilization past and present*, Vol. I (New York: Scott Foreman and Company, 1949), pp. 79-80.
- ²⁵ Philip Van Ness Myers, *General History* (Boston: Ginn and Company, n.d.), p. 36.
- ²⁶ Henry Lucas, *op.cit.*, p. 87.
- ²⁷ Abu al-Fida, *op.cit.*, p. 23.
- ²⁸ Henry Cattan LLM, *op.cit.*, p. 4.
- ²⁹ Europa Publication Limited, *The Middle East And North Africa 1976-77*, Twenty Third edition, 1976, p. 418.
- ³⁰ Don Peretz, *The Middle East Today* (New York: Praeger, 1978 3rd Edition), p. 260.
- ³¹ *Encyclopaedia of Britanica*, Vol. 17, p. 168.