



ON: Israel (Palestine) Before Zionism

The Unbroken Jewish Presence

The Jewish people have maintained an unbroken presence in the land of Israel for nearly 4,000 years. Even after the Romans destroyed Judea and renamed it "Palestina" in 135 CE (the year of the Bar Kochba Revolt), the Jews have sustained ties to their historic homeland.

Over the millennia, the number of Jewish inhabitants in the land of Israel continually varied. The Jews were always subject to the whims of their rulers; the Jewish population in the land of Israel was as large as political conditions permitted. At the close of the fifteenth century, Safed's Jewish community flourished, numbering 20,000-30,000. Other Jewish communities in the Galilee did so as well. Except under Jewish rule, the land of Israel was never an independent country.

By the 19th Century, A Desolate Land

The Turkish Ottoman Empire ruled much of the Middle East and southeastern Europe from 1516 to 1917. The Ottomans divided it into two administrative zones. In the 1880s, when the Zionist movement began, Palestine's sparse population was less than 300,000. Today, over nine million inhabitants live on that same land.

As a result of the devastation wrought by succeeding conquerors, centuries of Ottoman neglect, clan feuds, malarial mosquitoes and other maladies, in 1867 Mark Twain characterized Palestine as a "desolate country whose soil is rich enough, but is given over wholly to weeds – a silent mournful expanse..."

Other travelers to Palestine throughout the 19th century reported similar conditions.

J. S. Buckingham described his visit of 1816 to Jaffa, which "has all the appearances of a poor village, and every part of it that we saw was of corresponding meanness."

In 1865, H. B. Tristram noted in his journal:

"The north and south [of the Sharon plain] land is going out of cultivation and whole villages are rapidly disappearing from the face of the earth. Since the year 1838, no less than 20 villages there have been thus erased from the map [by the Bedouin] and the stationary population extirpated."

Palestine's Heterogeneous Population

Palestine's population was by no means solely Arab or Muslim. By the early twentieth century the Encyclopedia Britannica of 1911 reported that "Palestine's population was composed of so 'widely differing' a group of inhabitants whose 'ethnological affinities' create 'early in the 20th century a list of no less than fifty languages' that it is 'therefore no easy task to write concisely... on the ethnology of Palestine.'"

After the fall of the Ottoman Empire

In 1918, after the Ottoman Empire fell during World War I, the Arab leader Sherif Hussein of Mecca wrote the following:

"The resources of the country are still virgin soil and will be developed by the Jewish immigrants. One of the most amazing things until recent times was that the Palestinian used to leave his country, wandering over the high seas in every direction. His native soil could not retain him."

In this environment grew two national movements claiming the same land: the Jews and the Arabs. While Israel has come to accept the pragmatic reality of sharing the land in some form, Palestinians have yet to agree on how to live with the reality of Israel.