

The Problem Of The Holy Land

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Why has the Holy Land been for so long the scene of trouble? And what is its future?

Poverty-stricken for centuries under the desolating rule of the Turk, Palestine had played little part in world affairs from the time of the Crusades until the nineteenth century. Then the whole Middle East began to come into prominence owing to the decline of the Ottoman Empire. What Power would control the territories which were slipping from the Turkish grasp? This "Eastern Question" became the object of the schemes and rivalries of the leading nations.

With the defeat of the Turks in 1917 the whole Arabian Peninsula was freed from Turkish control. New Arab States came into being; and the scattered Jews, promised a National Home in the only land to which they had any claim by history, began to recolonize it under British administration. From September, 1923, Britain held the land under a Mandate from the League of Nations; but the rival claims of Jews and Arabs made it a responsibility so burdensome that in May, 1948, Britain surrendered the Mandate and withdrew. The immediate result was the establishment of an independent State of Israel.

The things which have befallen this land have not been mere accidents of history, for the most vital fact about it is one which does not usually enter into the calculations of statecraft. It is "the Lord's land" (Hosea 9:3; Joel 1:6); a land which the Lord God "careth for"; His eyes "are always upon it, from the beginning of the year even unto the end of the year" (Deut. 11:12). The Israelites of old were told that if they broke their covenant with God, they would be scattered among the nations, and the sabbaths which they had failed to observe would be kept while the land lay waste (Lev. 26:14, 33-34). That prophecy has been abundantly fulfilled, yet they were also told the time would come when God would remember His covenant with their fathers, and "remember the land" (verses 42, 44-45). Then, says God, He will "take the children of Israel from among the nations, whither they be gone, and will gather them on every side, and bring them into their own land" (Ezek. 37:21).

That this return would be gradual and from small beginnings is vividly shown in the vision of the Valley of Dry Bones, also in Ezek. 37. The bones which the prophet sees are "very many and very dry"; but they come together, bone to bone, and are clothed with flesh and si , and stand up "an exceeding great army". Even the political situation which makes such a development possible is indicated in prophecy. When the Land was about to be overrun by the great military empires of the Euphrates Valley, a prophet described it as an overflow of the river (Isa. 8:5-8). A similar military overflow in later days in the same region is

represented by the same river; but this time it is shown in prophecy at a point where the waters, having reached their greatest extent, are shrinking until the Euphrates is "dried up" (Rev. 16:12). Long before it occurred-as far back as the seventeenth century - prophetic students saw that this must mean the decline of the Ottoman Empire. At least since the middle of the nineteenth century, students of the Bible have been no less certain that Palestine will continue to be the object of jealousy, and will be invaded by an alliance of nations from the north immediately before the Lord Jesus Christ reveals himself in the earth at his return. The troubles which continue to surround it are no surprise to Bible readers.

Christ's return is the greatest of all certainties in the future of the Holy Land. He shall come in like manner as he was seen to go (Acts 1:11). His feet shall stand upon the Mount of Olives (Zech. 14:4). He will reign from Zion over the whole earth, in accordance with the Psalm in which God says: "Yet have I set my king upon my holy hill of Zion" (Psa. 2:6). For the Land of Israel is called by the prophet, "Thy land, O Immanuel" (Isa. 8:8); and it is said that the dominion as at the first shall come to Zion, and the kingdom to the daughter of Jerusalem (Micah 4:8).

Israel is God's land, and He has promised it as an inheritance to Abraham and to his seed for ever (Gen. 13:15). Pre-eminently, that Seed is Christ (Gal. 3:16). But "many" who are reckoned as descendants of Abraham on the ground of faith will "come from the east and the west, and sit down with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob" in Christ's kingdom (Matt. 8:10-11); for those who suffer with Him shall also reign with Him (2 Tim. 2:11-12). And because "the gifts and calling of God are without repentance" (Rom. 11:29), the Jews as a people will be brought back to "their own land" to recognize their Messiah and find their salvation in him (Zech. 12:10).

Not only has God determined the future of this land which in a special sense He calls His own, but He has made the future of all the rest of the world to be dependent upon it. None of the events in the Land today can be rightly understood unless that fact is kept constantly in mind.