

From pp. 312 - 316 of 'The Great Western Plateau of Asia' in VAN LOON'S GEOGRAPHY by Hendrik Willem Van Loon (1932). *(It is important to note, for reasons that will become clear in the reading, that this textbook was written in the context of post-World-War I when, among other things, Great Britain had inherited through conquest what had been the Ottoman Empire.)*

As for Palestine (the land of the Philistines), which is also part of this region, it is so strange a country that I shall have to be very short about it for fear of filling the rest of this book with a description of a little state, no larger than some ninth-rate European principality like Schleswig-Holstein, but which somehow or other has played a greater role in human history than many a first-class empire.

The original ancestors of the Jews, after leaving their miserable villages in eastern Mesopotamia, and after wandering through the northern part of the Arabian desert, and crossing the plains between Mount Sinai and the Mediterranean, and spending a few centuries in Egypt, finally retraced their steps. They stopped when they had reached the narrow strip of fertile land between the mountain-ridge of Judea and the Mediterranean and engaged in bitter warfare with the original natives, whom they finally deprived of a sufficient number of villages and cities to found an independent Jewish state of their own.

Their lives cannot have been very comfortable. In the west, the Philistines, non-Semitic settlers from the island of Crete, were in full possession of the coastal region, cutting the Jews completely off from the open sea. In the east, one of the strangest natural phenomena of which we have any record, an enormous rift in the rocks, running a straight course from north to south and going as deep as 1300 feet below sea-level, separated their country from the rest of Asia. This sink, which is very much today as it was when John the Baptist chose it as his place of residence, begins in the north between the Lebanon and the Anti-Lebanon and follows the valley of the Jordan, the Lake of Tiberias or Sea of Galilee, which is 526 feet below sea-level, the Dead Sea, which is 1292 feet below sea-level (the Death Valley in California is only 276 feet, and the deepest spot on the American continent) and from there (for the River Jordan stops dead in the Dead Sea, which contains 25% salt on account of the constant evaporation) through the ancient land of Edom (where the Moabites lived) to the Gulf of Akaba, a branch of the Red Sea.

The southern part of this sink is one of the hottest and most desolate regions of the world, full of asphalt and sulphur and phosphates and other diabolical ingredients which modern chemistry has made highly profitable (just before the war the Germans founded a formidable Dead Sea Asphalt Company) but which must have inspired the people of long ago with horror and fear, and which made them attribute the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah by an ordinary earthquake to an act of vengeance on the part of their Gods.

The sudden change of climate and scenery when they had crossed the mountain ridge of Judea, which runs parallel with this great rift, must have made a tremendous impression upon the earliest invaders from the east and probably inspired that jubilant cry of a land "overflowing with milk and honey". For the modern visitor to Palestine will find very little milk and the bees apparently have long since died for lack of a sufficient number of flowers. That, however, is not due to a change in the climate, as one hears so often said, for the climate today seems little different from the climate in the days when the disciples of Jesus wandered from Dan to Beersheba without bothering much about the problem of their daily bread and butter, since there were enough dates and there was enough native wine for the simple needs of all travellers. But the Turks and the Crusaders between them played the role of climate. The Crusaders began by destroying whatever remained of the old irrigation works which had been built during the days of independence and during the centuries of Roman domination. The Turks had, as usual, done the rest. A soil which only needed water to bring forth rich harvests was systematically neglected until nine-tenths of the farmer populace had either died or moved away. Jerusalem became a sort of Bedouin village where a dozen Christian sects and their Mohammedan neighbors were forever engaged in far from edifying quarrels. For to the Mohammedans, Jerusalem is also a very Holy City. The Arabs consider themselves the direct descendants of that unfortunate Ishmael

who together with his mother Hagar was driven into the wilderness by Abraham at the request of the latter's wedded wife, the redoubtable Sarah.

But Ishmael and Hagar had not perished of thirst, as seems to have been Sarah's little plan, but Ishmael had married an Egyptian girl and had become the founder of the whole of the Arabian nation. Today therefore he and his mother lie buried just outside the Kaaba, the center of the most holy of all places of worship in Mecca which all Mohammedans must visit at least once during their lifetime, no matter how difficult the voyage or how far the distance that separates them from that hallowed spot.

As soon as the Arabs had conquered Jerusalem, they erected a mosque over the rock upon which, according to tradition, their distant cousin Solomon, another direct descendant of Abraham, had built his famous temple. That happened Heaven only bows how many centuries ago. But the fight for the ownership of that rock and the walls around it, part of which is the traditional "wailing wall" of the orthodox Jews, is responsible for the continual quarrels between the two races that now make up the population of the Palestinian mandate.

And what can one hope for the future? When the English captured Jerusalem, they found the people to consist of 80% Moslems (Syrians and Arabs) and 20% Jews and Gentile Christians. The English, as the rulers of the largest Mohammedan empire of the modern world, could not afford to hurt the feelings of so many of their loyal subjects and dared not surrender half a million Palestine Moslems to the mercies of less than a hundred thousand Jews, who had many entirely justifiable axes to grind.

The result was the usual post-Versailles compromise which satisfied nobody. Palestine today is a British mandate and British troops maintain order between the different nationalities. The governors are selected from among the best-known English Jews but the country is nevertheless a colony and does not enjoy that complete political independence of which Mr. Balfour had spoken so eloquently but also so vaguely when at the beginning of the Palestine campaign he referred to those regions as the future home of the Jewish race.

Matters would become a great deal simpler if the Jews themselves knew what they wanted to do with the old mother-country. The orthodox Jews of eastern Europe and especially those of Russia want to keep it as it is now, a vast theological seminary with a little museum of Hebrew antiquities. The younger generation, remembering the wise words of the Prophet that "the dead should bury the dead", and feeling that too much weeping about the past joys and glories of bygone days is apt to interfere quite seriously with the glories and the joys of tomorrow, hope to make Palestine into a normal, modern state, something like Switzerland or Denmark, a going concern of men and women who have rid themselves of the memories of the Ghetto and who are more interested in good roads and good irrigation canals than in squabbling with their Arab neighbors about a few old stones which may or may not have been the well from which Rebecca drew the water but which are now merely a hindrance to progress.

Since most of Palestine consists of rolling territory with a decided slope from east to west, it is indeed possible to reclaim the neglected and exhausted soil for purposes of agriculture. The sea winds which blow the greater part of each day spread their heavy dew across the entire landscape and make it ideally fit for the cultivation of olives, and Jericho, the only city of any importance ever built in the terrible Dead Sea region, may once more become a center for the trade in dates.

And as the soil of Palestine contains neither coal nor oil, it will escape the attentions of the foreign promoter and will be allowed to work out its own problems as Yahweh and the Mohammedan majority will permit.