

# The Holy Land in British eyes: sacred geography and the ‘rediscovery’ of Palestine, 1839-1917

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In his address to the audience of a Palestine exhibition held in 1908, Lord Curzon explained how a visit to Palestine had changed his perception of the Bible and helped him to understand the Scriptures:

[...]whenever I hear the Old Testament read, I recall the scenes I have visited, I place the figures in their surroundings, and this makes the narrative more vivid and personal to myself. And although you will not feel this in the same degree, not having been in the country, yet in a small way, from what you will see here and from what you will be told in the addresses and lectures, I hope that Old and New Testaments, the Scriptures of your faith, may become a little more real to all of you, both in church on Sundays and in your everyday life<sup>1</sup>.

This exhibition, organized to bring the Holy Land to those who could not afford the trip there, was supposed to allow the British masses to get a more vivid and personal understanding of the Revelation. Curzon’s statement was not original: in the nineteenth century, it was commonplace to consider that the Bible was the best handbook for travelers to the Holy Land<sup>2</sup> while knowledge of Palestine’s

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1 Quoted by E. Bar-Yosef, *The Holy Land in English Culture, 1799-1917: Palestine and the Question of Orientalism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 162.

2 *Murray’s Guide to Syria and Palestine*, quoted by S. Searight, *The British in the Middle East* (New York: Atheneum, 1970), 165.

landscapes and geography was supposed to enhance Christian faith because it was seen as evidence of the Scriptures' veracity.

In Britain, the Victorian era was characterized by a growing interest for Palestine among travelers but also diplomats and scholars. It was the country of the Middle-East that the British élite visited most, after Egypt. Between 1869 and 1882, the Holy Land attracted 5,000 tourists set on an 'Eastern Tour' popularized by Thomas Cook. Parallel to this, many travel accounts describing the Holy Places of Jerusalem as well as the geography and the people of Palestine were published for the benefit of those who, unlike the privileged few, stayed at home. In fact, a great part of Victorian cultural life was stimulated by a rediscovery of the Holy Land, which, according to Trollope, became as familiar and accessible to the British public as France. In his *Travelling Sketches* published in 1866, Trollope indeed wrote: "Jerusalem and the Jordan are as common to us as were Paris and the Seine to our grandfathers"<sup>3</sup>.

This article will focus on the emergence of the specific genre of 'sacred geography', a pseudo-scientific discipline which aimed to ascertain the truthfulness of Scriptures through a careful examination of Palestine's contemporary characteristics. My purpose is to show that, in spite of its controversial methods and its partisan conclusions, the contribution of sacred geography to British knowledge of Palestine was decisive and paved the way to imperialist projects in the region. After briefly sketching the intellectual as well as the diplomatic context which led to the development of this new 'science', I will examine how geographers of Palestine postulated an absolute sameness between the Holy Land described in the Bible and the Ottoman province of the nineteenth century. Taking this equivalence for granted led them to ignore the possibility of historical change hence to conclude that the 'decay' they perceived in Palestine was wholly imputable to the Turks. Likewise, since landscape and geography played a predominant part in their investigation, Palestine came to be seen as an empty land whose Arab inhabitants were simply erased from the picture. As a consequence, their discourse, which echoed common Orientalist stereotypes, contributed to a cultural appropriation of Palestine and paved the way to European imperial designs.

If sacred geography contributed to a closer intimacy of the British public with modern Palestine, the Holy Land had long been a *topos* of British culture. When protestant reformers replaced the clergy with the Bible as the sole source of spiritual authority, they emphasized the significance of Scripture and contributed to the familiarization of all believers with the landscapes and the geography of Old and New Testaments. In addition, pilgrimages were discarded and replaced by spiritual quests for, as Luther explained, the Promised Land should be found in the believer's heart. This doctrinal shift, which replaced the earthly Jerusalem with a metaphor of the Promised Land<sup>4</sup>, was suited to the

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3 A. Trollope, *Travelling Sketches* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1866), 92.

4 Consider for instance the metaphorical dimension of Christian's journey to the Promised Land in Bunyan's *Pilgrim Progress* (1678).

circumstances of the time. Indeed, after the Ottomans conquered Jerusalem in 1516, travelling to the Holy Land was a journey fraught with difficulties. With the Reformation, Protestant Christianity was therefore drawn away from the real Jerusalem to a metaphorical Holy Land which was within everybody's reach. This process of internalization of the Promised Land was also fostered by the political discourse, especially in the seventeenth century, when the Biblical narrative and vocabulary were regularly conveyed to shed light on contemporary events that were interpreted in the light of the prophecies. In sum, British Protestants developed a close intimacy with the Bible which, at times, led them to picture Britain as the New Jerusalem and think of themselves as the Chosen People<sup>5</sup>.

To a considerable extent, the familiarity between the British and the Holy Land was sustained and reinforced by the evangelical revival of the nineteenth century. The Evangelicals' zealous activism encouraged Bible-preaching and Bible-reading, especially among the often illiterate urban lower classes<sup>6</sup>. The success of the Sunday school movement, which was particularly crucial to working-class children, ensured that the British people as a whole shared a common and basic knowledge of Scripture, regardless of their social origin. Thus, as was noted by Thomas Huxley, the Bible "ha[d] become the national epic of Britain"<sup>7</sup>, while Matthew Arnold likened the English to the Hebrew people for the "strength and prominence of the[ir] moral fibre"<sup>8</sup>. Yet, at the same time, the Bible started to be criticized by scholars who questioned the truth of its narrative and chronology. Arguably, this was not the first time that doubts were voiced about Scripture. However, while the attacks from Enlightenment thinkers had relied on polemic assumptions, in the nineteenth century, Biblical criticism was supported by scientific evidence. The conclusions of geologists, reached thanks to the study of fossils, indicated that the earth was millions, not thousands of years old and could not have been created in its final form in a week. The publication of Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* between 1831 and 1833 made the coexistence of scientific rationalism with faith in the revelation

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5 This identity was taken literally by the British Israelites who began to prosper in the 1870s. According to them, the British were the true Israelites while the Jews descended from the Judeans. Maintaining that the Israelites had been exiled from Palestine before the Judeans, they, unlike their brothers, had taken no part in the persecution of the Messiah. J. Wilson, "British Israelism: The Ideological Restraints on Sect Organization", in B. R. Wilson (ed.), *Patterns of Sectarianism: Organization and Ideology in Social and Religious Movements* (London: Heinemann, 1967); E. Bar-Yosef, *The Holy Land in English Culture*, 199-202. On the British metaphorical identification with the Chosen People, see also L. Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), 11-54.

6 In order to ensure Bible-reading, many societies simply distributed Bibles while many cheap editions of the Holy Book were issued.

7 T. Huxley, "The School Boards: what they can do and what they may do" (1870), *Collected Essays*, volume III: *Science and Education* (London: Macmillan, 1893), 374-403.

8 M. Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy. An Essay in Political and Social Criticism* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1869), 258.

uneasy. Meanwhile, in Germany, the development of philology enabled the study of hitherto unknown European languages and allowed the analytical study of the Scriptures in their historical and cultural context. Scholars from the Tübingen school concluded that the Bible could not be one document but a collection of texts from various periods and pointed out to inconsistencies and chronological impossibilities. Faced with such doubts about the Holy Book, churches had only two ways of defending the truth of the Bible: either to dismiss scientific evidence or to provide equally scientific evidence of the accuracy of the Biblical narrative. The second option, which was endorsed by sacred geography<sup>9</sup>, however made physical access to the Holy Land indispensable.

The development of sacred geography owed much to the evolution of the political relationships between the Ottoman Empire and the European powers in the nineteenth century. When Muhammad Ali, the Egyptian ruler, conquered Syria from the Ottomans in the 1830s, he allowed the Europeans to expand their religious missionary activity in Palestine and enabled them to open consulates, which Britain did in 1839. He also introduced tough policing measures which made the journey through the Holy Land safer for European travelers. When Ottoman rule was re-established in 1840, this policy was pursued, namely through the reforms of the *Tanzimat* which introduced a greater measure of protection of non-Muslim individuals. These measures, which allowed a growing European intervention in the Ottoman Empire, clearly contributed to the development of sacred geography. Indeed without consuls in Palestine, explorers of the Holy Land would have lacked a protection that was crucial for their inquiry.

While geography appeared as a distinct academic discipline in the 1870s only, 'sacred geography' emerged long before<sup>10</sup> and was given a new impulse when Britain opened a consulate in Jerusalem. Since the objective of sacred geography was to refute Biblical criticism and authenticate Scriptures, its method consisted in describing the landscapes, the topology, architecture and monuments of modern Palestine which corroborated the Bible. Insofar as modern Palestine was considered as the mere replica of the Biblical Holy Land, everything that did not confirm the Old and New Testaments or fit in the Biblical narrative was simply ignored. This pseudo-scientific approach implied a careful selection of

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9 Most of the authors writing on the geography of Palestine were clergymen while 'scientific' societies were usually closely linked to churches. For instance, the President of the Palestine Exploration Fund was the Archbishop of York and the society's patron was the queen. The majority of the PEF membership was clerical and Anglican, though mostly Low Church. On the other hand, William McClure Thomson had been a Christian missionary in Syria for more than forty years when he published *The Land and the Book, Biblical Illustrations drawn from the Manners and Customs, the Scenes and Scenery of the Holy Land* (New York: Harper and bros, 1860).

10 One of the first descriptions of Palestine published in Britain was T. Fuller's *Pisgah Sight of Palestine* (1650). In 1805, the "Palestine Association" was established in London "for the purpose of promoting the knowledge of the geography, natural history and antiquities of Palestine and its vicinity with a view to the illustration of the Holy Writings". However, due to adverse conditions in Palestine at that time, its activity remained limited.

information in order to reach conclusions which had been postulated before starting the enquiry. This deeply entrenched bias was for instance illustrated in the title of the Palestine Exploration Fund, a society established in London in 1865 “for the accurate and systematic investigation of the archaeology, topography, geology and physical geography, and manners and customs of the Holy Land for *Biblical Illustration*”.

Soon, books and societies specifically dealing with sacred geography influenced all the literature on Palestine, including general works like encyclopedias. Considering Palestine as “one vast tablet whereupon God’s messages to men have been drawn and graven deep in living characters”<sup>11</sup>, the descriptions of this Ottoman province only sought to emphasize traces of sacred history. As the author of the article devoted to Palestine confessed in the 1846 edition of the *Encyclopaedia of Geography*:

The deep interests we attach to this region of Asia depend little on the divisions established by the Turkish government. It calls them pachalics, from each being governed by one of its modern satraps. This circumstance often seriously affects, for a time, the destiny of the people; but it does not, to European eyes, form any permanent or distinctive features. We know these territories, not under the names of the pachalics of Acre, of Tripoli, of Istchil; but under others, which refer to the memory of their departed glories, and to what they were when they presented to the eyes of mankind the Holy Land, Troy, Tyre, Syria and Babylon. We seek on these shores exclusively the monuments and traces of the period when they bore these immortal names; and we gaze on the modern inhabitants and their abodes, chiefly in wonder at the sad and surprising contrast which they exhibit<sup>12</sup>.

It appeared clearly that Palestine, far from being a *terra incognita*, was a *terra sancta* and that what British explorers and geographers were looking for in Palestine were the traces of a glorious past which formed the basis of their own culture. In other words, they were not bent on ‘discovering’ Palestine as a figure of the Other but rather intended to recognize in this foreign territory aspects of their own identity<sup>13</sup>. Significantly enough, Palestinian chronology was distorted to focus exclusively on Biblical and Crusader periods. In 1885, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* invited the reader to consult the article on “Israel” to learn about the history of Palestine<sup>14</sup>, while in the 1911 edition, fifteen pages were devoted to sacred and

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11 W. M. Thomson, *The Land and the Book*, xv.

12 H. Murray, *The Encyclopaedia of Geography Comprising a Complete Description of the Earth*, vol. II (Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard, 1836; English edition 1846), 249.

13 In this respect, Palestine was fundamentally different from other countries of the Middle East which were often described through an orientalist paraphernalia of exotic topoi derived from the Arabian Nights. It should however be noted that it was customary for travelers in the East to find echoes of the Bible in the landscapes that they saw. Another commonplace consisted in drawing a parallel between the Bedouins and the Patriarchs of the Old Testament.

14 The article entitled “Palestine” only gave geographic information.

antique history while the period spanning from the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D. to the present day was summarized in five pages. Islam and the Ottoman presence in Palestine were reduced to insignificant elements and evoked in a characteristically derogatory way.

To a certain extent, reducing Palestine to its Biblical equivalent amounted to a form of cultural appropriation. The focus on the Holy Land and sacred history indeed allowed the British to ignore the influence of other civilizations and consider that Palestine, quite simply, was theirs. At the opening meeting of the Palestine Exploration Fund in 1865, the Archbishop of York, then President of the Fund, felt entitled to say:

This country of Palestine belongs to *you* and *me*, it is essentially ours. It was given to the Father of Israel in the words: "Walk through the land in the length of it, and in the breadth of it, for I will give it unto thee". *We* mean to walk through Palestine in the length and in the breadth of it, because that land has been given unto us. It is the land from which comes news of our Redemption. It is the land towards which we turn as the fountain of all our hopes; it is the land to which we may look with as true a patriotism as we do in this dear old England, which we love so much<sup>15</sup>.

As a consequence, the Arab inhabitants of Palestine rarely appeared in geographical studies of Palestine and when they did, their manners, clothes and habits were systematically compared with those of Biblical characters. As was noted in 1865 by George Grove, the Secretary of the Palestine Exploration Fund, a work minutely describing "the manners, habits, rites and language of the present inhabitants" was urgently needed because:

Many of the ancient and peculiar customs of Palestine are fast vanishing before the increasing tide of Western manners, and in a short time the exact meaning of many things which find their correspondences in the Bible will have perished<sup>16</sup>.

Likewise, in the photographs taken at the time, the Palestinians appeared in traditional costumes that made them look like Patriarchs of the Old Testament. After being colorized, these photographs often found their way into cheap editions of the Bible intended for children's use<sup>17</sup>.

Because it ignored the Ottoman and Arab characteristics of Palestine and instead underlined the Biblical elements which made sense to the British protestant

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15 *Report of the Proceedings at a public meeting, 22 June 1865*, 8, PEF/1865/2. Quoted by E. Bar-Yosef, *The Holy Land in English Culture*, 7-8.

16 Grove quoted Lane's *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (1837) as an exemplary work which should inspire a similar account of Palestine's customs, *Quarterly Statement of the Palestine Exploration Fund* (1869), 1-2. This text, taken from the first quarterly statement issued by the PEF, was first published in the original prospectus of the Society, issued on October, 1<sup>st</sup>, 1865.

17 The Cassell's family edition of the Bible (1859) was for instance lavishly illustrated. For photographs from the period, see E. Sanbar, *Les Palestiniens, La Photographie d'une terre et de son peuple de 1839 à nos jours* (Paris: Hazan, 2004).

public, sacred geography can be perceived as a form of cultural imperialism. A few authors have already highlighted that the topographical and cartographical surveys of the Palestine Exploration Fund were in fact undertaken by Royal Engineers lent to the society by the Ordnance Survey Department of the War Office. The maps of Palestine thus produced helped the British conquer Palestine in 1917<sup>18</sup>. On the other hand, General Allenby confessed that he carefully read George Adam Smith's classic handbook, *The Historical Geography of the Holy Land* (1894), when preparing his offensive during the First World War<sup>19</sup>. The Palestine Exploration Fund, unmistakably, was not only a learned society but also a tool to extend British imperial influence. On the spot, its scientific activities were a cover for obtaining strategic information to support British military interests.

Yet, less attention has been paid to the way in which geographical studies of Palestine contributed to an intellectual climate which helped to legitimize colonization projects. In spite of the centuries that separated modern Palestine from her Biblical past, geographers as well as travelers considered that the Holy Land had not evolved. On the one hand, this unchanging quality was positive: since the Holy Land was eternal, it was legitimate to explore it in search of a confirmation of events that had taken place centuries before. But on the other hand, Palestine's eternity could also be considered as a synonym for stillness and stagnation. True, many authors found signs of the Holy Land's past grandeur in modern Palestine but they also plainly pointed out that the times when Canaan was a "land flowing with milk and honey" were over. As was noted by an author, geographers "gaze[d] on the modern inhabitants and their abodes, chiefly in wonder at the sad and surprising contrast which they exhibit[ed]"<sup>20</sup>. The numerous ruins which dotted the landscape were perceived as a sign that the population of Palestine used to be far more numerous in the past. This demographic decline was in turn explained by a fall of productivity in agriculture. This reasoning seemed to be confirmed by some of the country's arid regions<sup>21</sup> with found no parallel with the luxuriance extolled in the Bible. In part, this

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18 The first survey of Western Palestine was undertaken in 1871-1877 and the second, of Southern Palestine, in 1913-14. E. Bar-Yosef, *The Holy Land in English Culture*; J. J. Moscrop, *Measuring Jerusalem: The Palestine Exploration Fund and the British Interests in the Holy Land* (London and New York: Leicester University Press, 2000).

19 R. Butlin, "George Adam Smith and the Historical Geography of the Holy Land: Contents, Contexts and Connections", *Journal of Historical Geography*, 14 (1988): 381-401. George Adam Smith's book remained a classic in the first half of the twentieth century. In his travel account, *A Socialist in Palestine* (1922), Ramsay MacDonald refers to George Adam Smith's book as a reliable source of information for Palestine.

20 H. Murray, *The Encyclopaedia of Geography Comprising a Complete Description of the Earth*, vol. II, 249.

21 The stress laid on the aridity of Palestine was partly due to the itinerary taken by geographers and travelers often coming to Jerusalem from Jaffa or Egypt via the Sinai. The landscapes that they crossed were indeed desert. By contrast, the green landscapes of Galilee were rarely noted since the region was hardly ever visited by Europeans.

barrenness could be interpreted as an additional sign that the Scriptures were right. In his *Evidence of the Truth of the Christian Religion Derived from the Literal Fulfilment of Prophecy* (1828), Reverend Alexander Keith noted that the desolation of the soil, the ruin of the cities and the expatriation of the people had all been prophesized in the Old Testament. But although his opinion fitted well into the agenda of sacred geography, many authors provided a different explanation for Palestine's deterioration. They took the opposite view that natural conditions like climate and potential fertility of the soil could not have changed. Therefore, instead of ascribing the responsibility for Palestine's decline to God, they argued that it must have been caused by man. In the *British Cyclopaedia* published in 1838, the author for instance blamed the laziness of the natives:

Palestine was one of the most fertile countries of the old world. Wine, salt, wild honey, balsam, olives, dates, figs and pomegranates; with large flocks and herds, were its productions. The alternation of mountain and valley, the temperate climate, the numerous streams and the rains of spring and autumn caused its fertility. Its present barrenness arises from the inactivity of its inhabitants, who obtain their living either from the pilgrims or as robbers<sup>22</sup>.

But more frequently, the origin of all the evils which plagued the Holy Land was said to be Ottoman despotism. In his conclusion to the first part of the *Survey of Palestine* undertaken for the Palestine Exploration Fund, Claude Conder wrote:

To sum up, the change in Palestine is one of degree only and not of kind. The curse of the country is bad government and oppression. Justice and security of person and property once established, Palestine would become once more a land of corn, vine and olives, rivalling in fertility and in wealth with its ancient condition, as deduced from careful study of such notices as remain to us in the Bible and in the later Jewish writings<sup>23</sup>.

The Ottoman Empire was indeed proverbial for unfair taxation, harsh conscription and a corrupt administration<sup>24</sup> and the latter provided a convenient explanation for the desolation of the country. Yet, in this passage, Conder clearly indicates the possibility of restoring the Holy Land to its ancient magnificence.

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22 *The British Cyclopaedia of the Arts, Sciences, History, Geography, Literature, Natural History, and Biography*, ed. C. F. Partington, vol. V (London: WM.S. Orr and Co., 1838), 187.

23 C. R. Conder, *The Survey of Western Palestine, Special Papers* (London, 1881), 207.

24 According to William Thomson, these had been longstanding characteristics which already cursed the country in Biblical times. W. M. Thomson, *The Land and the Book. Biblical Illustrations drawn from the Manners and Customs, the Scenes and Scenery of the Holy Land* (London & New York: Harper and bros., 1860), 497-498. Comments about Ottoman bad government had been commonplace since the eighteenth century. In the nineteenth century, although the Ottoman Empire underwent significant reforms under the *Tanzimat*, the Europeans continued to judge that these changes were not far-reaching enough. Paradoxically, some of the characteristics which they castigated, notably the "oppressive" nature of the pashas' rule, were in fact a result of the reforms initiated by the Ottomans under European pressure.

In another article, Conder implied that, provided they were rid of Ottoman despotism, the Arab peasants of the region possessed all the necessary qualities to regenerate their country:

The peasantry are an energetic and very stalwart race, with immense powers of endurance, seasoned to the climate, temperate, good-natured and docile. They are accustomed to obey their chiefs and elders, and when they see any prospect of fair pay and just taxation they can be made to work very hard, as has been proved in more than one instance. They are a people capable of great improvement, their faults are those of an oppressed race, and their natural quickness and power of adaptation would render it easy to accustom them to European improved methods of agriculture if gradually introduced and not forced upon them<sup>25</sup>.

However, Conder underlines the natural docility of the peasants and seems to suggest that the Arabs would need European guidance to cultivate their country properly (“they can be made to work very hard”). Conder then asserted that the Jews were the best suited people to “direct” the Arab peasants:

none are better fitted to carry out these improvements and to direct the present population in agriculture than the descendants of the ancient conquerors who made hewers of wood and drawers of water of the present aboriginal population. The energy, industry and tact, which are so remarkable in the Jewish character, are qualities invaluable in a country whose inhabitants have sunk into fatalistic indolence; and Palestine is still so cheap a country and requires a capital so moderate for investment, that it may well attract the attention of the middle class among its rightful owners<sup>26</sup>.

Beyond the claim that the Jews were the “rightful owners” of the country, the respective characteristics attributed to both Arabs and Jews by Conder justified his colonization project: the Jews were industrious, rich and tactful capitalists who also possessed linguistic skills that would help them to communicate with the natives while the Arabs, on the other hand, were fated to remain passive and indolent if not stirred by some masters. While the Jews meant progress and modernity, the Arabs stood for apathy and stagnation. Conder’s proposal illustrates how the suggestion made in sacred geography that the Holy Land should be restored to its past grandeur, could be easily reconciled with the millenarian project of the restoration of the Jews<sup>27</sup>. British explorers had come to a diagnosis which blamed the Ottomans and the antidote that they proposed consisted in taking the Jews back to Palestine, not for the accomplishment of the prophecies but, more simply because Jews, as the medium of European values,

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25 C. R. Conder, “The Present Condition of Palestine”, *Palestine Exploration Fund Quarterly Statement* (Reprinted from the *Jewish Chronicle*), (1879): 10-11.

26 Conder, “The Present Condition of Palestine”: 7-8.

27 Born out of a literal reading of the prophecies, this idea involved the conversion of the Jews to Christianity as well as their gathering in the Holy Land. Such were, according to Scripture, the conditions of the advent of God’s Kingdom on earth.

could make Palestine blossom again. Although the protestant doctrine of the restoration of Israel had gained a new lease of life with the establishment of the British consulate in Jerusalem<sup>28</sup>, by the end of the nineteenth century, in Britain, millenarians started to be considered with suspicion. They were often viewed as fanatics whose theories were little more than Christian eccentricities<sup>29</sup>. And it is worth noting that, even if Conder's scheme echoed plans for the restoration of Israel, he himself never used religious arguments. Likewise, in *The Land of Gilead*, Laurence Oliphant also defended the colonization of parts of Palestine by Jews by using, political and diplomatic arguments, even though he was a convinced millenarian himself. In his introduction, he underlined that his project had "no connection whatever with any popular religious theory on the subject" and that it was unfortunate that Jewish colonization was now associated with a "sentimental" religious theory which discredited it:

It is somewhat unfortunate that so important and strategical a question as the future of Palestine should be inseparably connected in the public mind with a favourite religious theory. The restoration of the Jews to Palestine has been so often urged upon sentimental or Scriptural grounds, that now, when it may possibly become the practical and common-sense solution of a great future difficulty, a prejudice against it exists in the mind of those who have always regarded it as a theological chimera, which is not easy to remove. The mere accident of a measure involving most important international consequences, having been advocated by a large section of the Christian community, from a purely Biblical point of view, does not necessarily impair its political value. On the contrary, its political value once estimated on its own merits and admitted, the fact that it will carry with it the sympathy and support of those who are not usually particularly well-versed in foreign politics is decidedly in its favour. I would avail myself of this opportunity of observing that, so far as my own efforts are concerned, they are based upon considerations which have no connection whatever with any popular religious theory on the subject<sup>30</sup>.

Being aware of the stigma attached to the "theological chimera" of the restoration of Israel, Oliphant took great pains to demonstrate that what he

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<sup>28</sup> Thanks to the protection afforded by the British consul, societies which had tried to convert Jews in Britain, where their enterprise met limited success, could now settle in Jerusalem and direct their attention towards the Jews of Palestine. M. Scult, *Millennial Expectations and Jewish Liberties: A Study of the Efforts to Convert the Jews in Britain up to the mid-nineteenth century* (Leiden: Brill, 1978). In 1841, the Anglican episcopate founded jointly with Prussia put the conversion of the Jews on its agenda. Although the initial motivations for such a project were spiritual, Britain had rapidly grasped the imperial advantages that could accrue to her if she took Jews under her wing. Indeed, while Russia was the traditional guardian of the Orthodox Christians and France that of the Catholics, Britain lacked a Protestant community of protégés in Palestine. Thus, by affording protection to the Jews of Palestine, Britain could intervene in the Ottoman Empire and thus vie with the other European powers. See A. Schölch, "Britain in Palestine, 1838-1882: The Roots of the Balfour Policy", *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 22, 1, (Autumn 1992): 39-56.

<sup>29</sup> E. Bar-Yosef, "Christian Zionism and Victorian Culture", *Israel Studies*, 8, 2, (Summer 2003): 18-44.

<sup>30</sup> Laurence Oliphant, *The Land of Gilead, With Excursions in the Lebanon* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1880), xxxiii.

had at heart was not the accomplishment of the prophecies but the redemption of the Holy Land. In order to appear as practical and rational, he chose to emphasize the economic, political and strategic aspects of Jewish colonization instead of an eschatological discourse concerned with the end of times. In other words, Oliphant laid stress on the restoration of Canaan (the territory) instead of the restoration of Israel (the people).

Nineteenth-century British geographical studies of the Holy Land therefore represented an unconscious strategy of dispossession. Sacred geography gave evidence that, since the bygone days of the Bible, Palestine had undergone a considerable decline for which the Ottomans were held responsible. It therefore suggested that the restoration of the Holy Land would only be possible if the Turks were ousted and replaced by Palestine's rightful owners, the Jews. To justify this project, rational arguments were elaborated and were, unsurprisingly, taken up by Jewish Zionists. In a letter to the Mayor of Jerusalem written almost twenty years after Conder's or Oliphant's texts, Theodor Herzl defended Zionism in economic terms:

The Zionist idea of which I am the humble servant, has no hostile tendency toward the Ottoman Government, but quite to the contrary this movement is concerned with opening up new resources for the Ottoman Empire. In allowing immigration to a number of Jews bringing their intelligence, their financial acumen and their means of enterprise to the country, no-one can doubt that the well-being of the entire country would be the happy result. It is necessary to understand this, and to make it known to everybody [...] <sup>31</sup>.

To a great extent therefore, geographers of Palestine in the nineteenth century elaborated a rationale which contained the seeds of the future Zionist discourse.

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<sup>31</sup> Theodor Herzl to Yusuf Zia al-Khalidi, 19 March 1899: *From Haven to Conquest. Readings in Zionism and the Palestinian Problem until 1948*, ed. W. Khalidi (Beirut: The Institute for Palestine Studies, 1971), 91-92.