

“Nations will take them and bring them to their own place.” Is.14:2

Those 19thC visionaries who took the pathway to a new Jewish state in Palestine had to face a crippling inertia from within the Jewish world itself. At the same time they also faced a daunting international political problem from outside the Jewish world, namely securing recognition for their state in a Palestine that was already occupied land. This pamphlet deals with the way in which that obstacle was overcome. There are two main phases in the story, and both phases show extraordinary providences.

Phase 1. 1895-1919: from Herzl to the Balfour Declaration

When Herzl penned his book *“The Jewish State”* (1895) his plan to implement such a state seemed naively optimistic. He believed that because the gentile nations did not want the Jews they would be only too glad to help them find somewhere of their own to live and help them get there. In this way the Jewish state would have political endorsement, and would happen peacefully. Herzl’s optimism was helped by the fact that in his original plan he did not specify Palestine - any suitable area in the world would do. However, the *Hibbat Zion* settlers in Herzl’s World Zionist Congresses wanted only Palestine, and though Uganda was canvassed by Herzl in 1904, he was forced eventually to agree to Palestine. But Palestine was not free; it bristled with difficulties.

Correctly identifying the crucial need for political recognition of the new state, Herzl worked ferociously at getting the leaders of the European states to forward that goal. Before writing his book he had already approached the two great Jewish bankers, Rothschild and Hirsch, who had the ear of national statesmen and were already supporting Jews in need, but they had rebuffed him. Unperturbed, Herzl gained access to the German Kaiser and the Sultan of Turkey in whose domain Palestine lay. The Sultan, of course, had no desire for a Jewish state in his Moslem land, even though Herzl tempted him with the idea of the Jews servicing the huge Ottoman national debt. The Sultan was in fact already making life difficult for the *Hibbat Zion* settlers. Herzl’s optimism received a reality check.

Herzl none the less put Zionism on the political map, and before he died, worn out with his efforts, he sowed a seed in the minds of the up and coming political leaders of Great Britain that was to bear critically important fruit in the future. Britain in the late 19thC and early 20thC was good soil for Zionist seed. It provided a contrast with Germany and France in its attitude to the Jews. Whilst Germany was echoing with many virulent racial and anti-Semitic publications and France was raging with the huge Dreyfus debate and with Drummond’s anti-Semitic writings, Britain was reading George Eliot’s novel *Daniel Deronda* and Disraeli’s *Tancred*, both of which were pro-Jewish. Both books were particularly widely read in political circles and pre-disposed many politicians towards Jewish Zionism. When Russian pogroms brought an influx of refugee Jews to Britain in 1902 a Commission was convened to examine the Jewish problem, and it called on Herzl as the leader of Zionism to give evidence. Herzl was able to declare that the ultimate solution to the Jewish refugee problem was “a legally recognised home”. It was this that gave rise to discussions with Britain about Uganda, and though they came to nothing, the active idea of a Jewish home was effectively lodged in the minds of men like Balfour and Lloyd George, the future wartime Prime Minister.

Herzl died in 1904, and for a decade the high level political activity hung in abeyance. The profile of the World Zionist organization slowly grew, however. In 1910 a certain Chaim Weizmann, a Russian Jew educated in Germany and Switzerland came to teach chemistry at Manchester and became a British subject. He also became Herzl’s great successor as the Zionist leader. By 1914 Weizmann had met Balfour, Churchill and Lloyd George, all of whom he impacted, all of whom were to become cabinet members and all of whom were disposed toward a Jewish homeland in Palestine. It was quite astonishingly providential that this very able and diplomatic Weizmann was able to pick up the reins with the British leadership where Herzl had dropped them and, moreover, at a momentous historical time when the ruling power over Palestine was about to be radically altered.

That momentous time was World War I. Its significance for the future of the Jewish state lay in the fact that the Ottoman Sultan had joined Germany in the conflict. That meant with the Allied victory his empire would be dismembered. What would happen to Palestine? Two factors decided the issue. The first was that the British cabinet agreed that British post-war interests in the Middle East would be best served by British control of Palestine under the form of a “protectorate”, and the second was that the cabinet, already ideologically disposed toward a Jewish homeland in Palestine, thought a petition from Jewish leaders for such a homeland would help secure such a protectorate. The Jewish leaders duly responded and actually worded a declaration that the British might make concerning such a homeland. The result was the Balfour Declaration of 1916 in which Britain undertook to facilitate a Jewish home in Palestine. After the allied victory the League of Nations confirmed the Protectorate and its obligation to the Jews. As one historian put it, *“(the Balfour Declaration’s) seminal importance cannot be overstated. It was the long-sought for charter of the Zionist movement, the guarantee by a great power of Zionist legitimacy. Not since Cyrus of Persia had declared that the Jews could return to Judea in 517 BC had anything comparable occurred in the Jewish world”*. The Balfour Declaration was powerful in that it required Britain to secure a Jewish national home, and affirmed that the National Home existed as of right, not by Arab sufferance.

Thus in a mere twenty years after Herzl’s *Jewish State* was written the impossible had taken place. It was a staggering outcome, the fruit of an extraordinary collusion of Jewish vision, British ideology, British strategic need, and the outbreak of a brutal war which redrew the Middle Eastern map. If God is in the wide sweep of history, he was certainly here. If he is in “miracle moments” he was certainly in Weizmann’s appearance.

Phase 2 1918 - 1948: from British Mandate to the State of Israel

Understandably in 1918 optimism was very high among Jews at the prospects for the Jewish Home. No Arab objection was registered to the Declaration, and Weizmann and Feisal Hussein of Transjordan were set on a course of open co-operation. Only a farsighted few were nervous about Arab reaction, and with good reason. The truth was that the war had in fact encouraged the development of Arab nationalism, and this made itself felt as early as 1920 when violent disturbances broke out against the Jews as they returned to Palestine from wartime exile and from the post war killing fields of Russia. From that moment violent Arab

nationalism would increase in direct proportion to Jewish immigration. Though officially a door was open to the Jews, there would now be increasing Arab pressure to close it. This single fact provides the clue to the tortuous 30 year run up to the Jewish state (and beyond); Arab nationalistic pressure was strong enough eventually to virtually close down Britain's attempt to implement the Balfour Declaration.

The problem for Britain was not simply one of Arab violence. That alone could be dealt with, but the goodwill of the Arabs was a crucial plank in Britain's Middle Eastern strategic policy. The link to the Far Eastern part of the Empire, and especially India, lay through Suez, and the Arab nations could be a great threat to that if antagonised. This need for unimpeded British communication with the Far East became critically important in the 1930s as the German war machine began to re-assemble and threaten all Europe. An Arab revolt must, therefore, be avoided at all costs. The Jews posed no such threat. It was policy, therefore, to court the Arabs.

Arab nationalism was not just sporadic and aimless, but from the early 1920s became violently radicalised and clearly targeted against Britain's obligations to facilitate a Jewish homeland. Herbert Samuel, a Jew and a Zionist became High Commissioner of the new protectorate but, with the best of motives, misguidedly appointed a radical and violent anti Zionist and anti-British Arab as both the *mufti* of Jerusalem (Palestinian Arab leader) and the leader of a new Supreme Muslim Council. This *mufti* worked tirelessly to radicalise the Arabs against Jewish settlement right up to 1939 both on racial and religious grounds, and he was not afraid to use violence either against Jews, British or even Arab opponents. From the moment of his appointment any hope of Arab moderate opinion accepting the developing Jewish home was completely lost. The *mufti*'s avowed aim was the annulling of the Balfour Declaration and the British protectorate and the achievement of Arab sovereignty over Palestine. He knew how to use Jewish immigration to work up violence to achieve that end.

It is not surprising, therefore, that in 1929 after an Arab massacre of 100 Jews at Hebron and an uprising at Jerusalem that left thousands of Jews homeless, the British government temporarily stopped Jewish immigration; its primary concern was to appease Arab unrest. The real pressure came on the British, however in the 1930s as large numbers of Jewish refugees began to pour in from Europe. By 1937 the Jewish population had shot up to 400,000. The Arab response came in acts of violence, a general strike and refusal to pay taxes. The British once more appointed a Commission to consider Arab demands, and a partition of Palestine between Arabs and Jews was proposed. The Jews accepted, but 400 Arab leaders conferring in Syria demanded the whole of Palestine. Britain's attempt to implement the partition plan was a signal for further widespread acts of Arab violence on Jews, oil pipe lines, transport, police etc. The British response was initially strong; the *Mufti* was dismissed and harsh measures were taken against rebels. But it was the British who eventually capitulated as war with Germany became imminent. In 1939 Britain abandoned partition, allowed a final 75,000 more Jewish immigrants, promised an Arab dominated Palestinian state and refused entry to desperate refugees from Europe in 1940-41. This kept the Arabs quiet, but it was a death sentence to Jewish hopes and to the Balfour Declaration. The success of Arab violence against

"Arab nationalism was clearly targeted against Britain's obligations to facilitate the Jewish homeland"

Britain pointed the way for the Jews; they too would need to "declare war" on Britain if its policy did not change. Such a strategy was postponed by the 1939-45 conflict, but the Jews took advantage of the war both to train men and secure arms. After El Alamein the German threat to the Middle East faded, and Jewish extremists began attacking British targets. Churchill, however, now Prime Minister, was ready to consider reversing the 1939 British policy on the Jews but the murder by Jewish extremists of Lord Moyne, a former High Commissioner and a friend of Churchill brought that possibility to an untimely end. When, after the war, Ernest Bevin as Foreign Secretary took over the Palestine issue, he pursued the pre-war policy of seeking Arab goodwill and totally refused entrance for any Jews. This was immediately after the Holocaust and at a time when there were 500,000 desperate Jewish survivors in refugee camps across Europe. Bevin refused U.S. pressure to take even 100,000, and systematically, and in the eyes of the world, cruelly blockaded any illegal entry. Inevitably the Jews as a whole "declared war" on the British in Palestine. They were much more effective than the Arabs, and they fought with the ruthless determination of those whose very existence was at stake. With the Holocaust as the background Jewish psychology underwent a radical change and a new militancy was born. Widespread and bitter anger at British policy finally saw Weizmann lose his moderate leadership of the Jews to the much more radical Ben Gurion.

Bevin survived the Jewish onslaught for just two years, until 1947, at which point he decided that the British Palestinian mandate was no longer strategically valuable enough to warrant the cost of such a conflict. Accordingly he handed the mandate back to the United Nations, and planned a British withdrawal from Palestine for 1948. The U.N., acting on a totally uncharacteristic Russian initiative, decided on partition for Palestine. There was Jewish approval, but not Arab. At this point, however, the militant Jewish leadership (and an equally militant Arab leadership) had their sights on the British departure. Both knew it would come to a fight. Indeed the struggle began before the British left. The moment the British withdrew Ben Gurion unilaterally declared the existence of state of Israel on the basis of the partition plan. It was a daring and historic move, knowing that Israeli borders (and indeed Israel's existence) would be determined less by the partition plan than by the fighting that was bound to break out. However, the U.S. immediately recognised the state *de facto*, and the Russians *de jure*. It was an unbelievable and astonishing outcome, paralleled only by Czechoslovakia arming the Jews, and the consequent defeat of Arab armies by a fledgling Israeli army. The defeat of the British had paid huge dividends. But for the British departure at that moment of history there would have been no state of Israel; it was a unique historical moment for its birth, a very narrow window of opportunity.

Conclusion

The first key moment of the story was the Balfour Declaration of 1916. The interweaving of events leading up to that were extraordinarily providential; a pro-Jewish British cabinet, the appearance of Chaim Weizmann and a world war. The door of Jewish legitimacy in Palestine opened by that Declaration was never closed even when British policy was being driven more and more to close it in practice. The second key moment was the collapse of the British mandate, allowing the extraordinary Russian proposal in the United Nations for partition and recognition of the state of Israel. That moment came just at a point in which the Jews had become numerically strong enough, technologically advanced enough and psychologically ready to fight to prevent the state's destruction. There was everything that was remarkable about those two moments though there was nothing historically inevitable about them - unless it was a divine purpose!

Bob Dunnett