
Introduction

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The Holy Land is more than a geographical name; it is a concept, it is a focus of identity, it is a source of inspiration, it is legend and reality intermingled and interchanged. Although there are millions who would not know its exact location, there is no other place on the surface of this planet which has had such a tremendous impact on human history, human culture, on the spirit and life of man, as has this piece of land, which is not much bigger than the Kruger National Park. The term Holy Land does not have to be explained for almost half of the human race. For Jews, Christians and Muslims it is self explanatory; none of them would ask "Which Holy Land?" and this is exactly the reason for the choice of name for the conference which resulted in this collection of studies.

Since we speak about a concrete geographical location, it is important to note immediately that in spite of, or probably because of, its extreme importance, the Holy Land is not a very well-defined piece of real estate.

In the Bible, it appears under various names, but never as the Holy Land. It is defined by various borders, some of which extend its territory from the Upper Euphrates to Sinai; and some of which confine it more to the land which lies between the Mediterranean and the Jordan. In post-biblical literature the doctors of Jewish law had long debates whether the city of Acre, bordering on the Galilee, should be included in it.

For all practical purposes history has decided on the modest size of some 24 000 km² between the Mediterranean and the deep cleft of the Jordan and the Dead Sea. Yet it was only in a very few periods in history that the Holy Land was really a distinct name on the map. During most of its history it was part of a greater area, and only when it was an independent or semi-independent state, its name, whichever it was, had a defined political or geographical meaning.

Early biblical tradition designates the Holy Land according to the peoples that lived in it before the appearance of the Israelites. It is called the Land of Canaan after the Canaanites, the principal people that occupied most of it. This is also the name which it has in one of the earliest extra-biblical sources, the Tel el-Amarna tablets from the

fifteenth century BC. It was only after the Israeli tribes conquered the land that the name of Israel became associated with it.

From the beginning of the first millennium BC, the name Israel designated specifically the northern Kingdom of Israel as a separate political entity from the Kingdom of Judaea in the south; and after the destruction of the two kingdoms between the end of the eighth and the beginning of the sixth centuries BC, the name Judaea became the name *par excellence* of the Second Temple Jewish State.

The coastal plain which, during most of the First Temple period, was occupied by the Philistines was called after them, the Land of the Philistines or *Peleshet*. In the fifth century BC the great Greek historian Herodotus was probably the first to describe this territory by the name *Syria hé Palaistine*, “The Palestinian Syria”, and from then onwards the name Palaestina became the name for the coastal plain and then for the whole country to the west of the Jordan.

The Romans were responsible for this final change. Eager to obliterate the name of the rebellious Judaea, they turned, in 135 CE, the whole former territory of Israel into a Roman province which they renamed *Palaestina* or *Syria Palaestina*.

When the Eastern Roman Empire, better known as the Byzantine Empire, reorganised its administration in 429 CE, the territory to the west of the Jordan was made into two provinces, *Palaestina Prima* (first Palestine) and *Palaestina Secunda* (second Palestine), the former comprising the Galilee and the latter comprising Judaea and Samaria.

When the Arabs took over Syria in the seventh century, they followed the Byzantine administrative arrangements and used the same place names. The Roman and Hebrew names acquired an Arabic pronunciation but, on the whole, were rarely changed. Thus, for instance, Neapolis became *Nābulus* in Arabic and Aelia Capitolina, the Herodian name for Jerusalem, became *Īlyā*. Not being able to cope, however, with two provinces that had the same name, Palaestina, they conferred the name *Filasṭīn*, which is the Arabic form of Palaestina, only on Judaea and Samaria, whereas the Galilee was renamed *Urdunn*, namely, the Province of Jordan. In time this Arabic-Islamic administrative division became a geographical division and it appears in all the Arabic geographical works until modern times.

It was only after the First World War and the British occupation of Syria and the Holy Land that the name Palestine became the official name of the country under the British mandate. The Arab Nationalists made this Arabised Roman name the main focus of their political aspirations, whereas the Jews fought to add to the official mandatory name the Hebrew letters EY in brackets, that is to say, Eretz Yisrael, “the land of Israel”.

In the Qur’ān, the country is mentioned only once, in Sura 5 verse 21, when Moses speaks to the people of Israel and says to them: “O my people enter the Holy Land (*al ard al-muqaddasah*) which Allah hath written down as yours, and turn not back to your rearward so as to be rendered losers” (trans. R. Bell).

The designation of *Terra Sancta* or the Holy Land is of Christian origin. It became the most common name in Christian literature and thereafter influenced both Jewish and Islamic usages in the Middle Ages. In spite of this, the term Holy Land remained very much the designation of the Church. As time passed, neither Jews nor Muslims regarded

the name as representative of their respective cultures. The Muslims continued to call it *Filasṭīn* and the Jews Eretz Yisrael, but for the rest of the world it is remained the Holy Land.