

A Brief History of Gaza, Palestine & Israel

Preface

This short introduction to the history of Gaza, Palestine and Israel was originally written for three successive issues of the *Brunswick News* (the church newsletter of Brunswick Methodist Church) in the weeks after the unprecedented Hamas attack on southern Israel on October 7th 2023, which was followed by a devastating military onslaught by Israel on Gaza. It was subsequently suggested by the Rev Howard Long, Superintendent Minister for the Swansea & Gower Circuit, that I distribute the articles more widely across the Circuit, and I am happy to do so. I have taken the opportunity to expand the articles, which now include reference (and footnotes) to a number of previously overlooked aspects. However, this is still very much a *brief* history. I've tried to put more emphasis on matters of historical accuracy rather than matters of interpretation or opinion, but - inevitability - elements of subjectivity will have crept in from time to time. Any partisan views that are expressed are, of course, my own, and should not be construed as representing the views of the Circuit or the wider Methodist Church. Nevertheless, I do hope that this has been an honest and informative analysis of an incredibly difficult and complex history.

*Rev Andrew Pearce
(Remembrance Sunday, 2023)*



The Old Town of Gaza (c. 1863). Picture by Francis Frith.

Chapter One: Gaza of the Philistines¹

Gaza will shave her head in mourning; Ashkelon will be silenced. You remnant on the plain, how long will you cut yourselves? (Jeremiah 47:5)

I will send fire on the walls of Gaza that will consume her fortresses. (Amos 1:7)

Gaza will be abandoned and Ashkelon left in ruins. At midday Ashdod will be emptied and Ekron uprooted. (Zephaniah 2:4)

Ashkelon will see it and fear; Gaza will writhe in agony, and Ekron too, for her hope will wither. Gaza will lose her king and Ashkelon will be deserted. (Zechariah 9:5)

As I type these words, Gaza continues - in the words of the prophet Zechariah - to 'writhe in agony.'

How did we get here? What connects the words of ancient prophets, between two and three thousand years old - the words of Jeremiah, Amos, Zephaniah and Zechariah - with the suffering of both Palestinians and Israelis, heirs of Abraham alike, today?² Well, it's complicated. But it's vitally important that we - ourselves heirs of Abraham, by virtue of spiritual adoption - understand the story too.

The Gaza with which we are familiar from the Hebrew Scriptures was founded, more than three thousand years ago, as one of the five cities of the Philistines - the other four being the cities of Ashdod, Ashkelon, Gath and Ekron. These five cities were all located on the Plain of Philistia: a flat coastal strip of land to the west of the Judaeian highlands.³

Most of us probably remember the Philistines as one of the peoples who opposed the Israelites following their occupation of much of the 'Land between the River and the Sea' (i.e. the Jordan and the Mediterranean) after their liberation from Egypt under Moses. We tend to lump them in with the various peoples - the Canaanites, Jebusites, Hivites and assorted other '-ites' - that were already dwelling in Canaan before the arrival of the Israelites.⁴ Their ferocious enmity towards the Israelites ensured that 'philistine' became a pejorative term (much like the word 'vandal') that is still applied today to anyone considered to be uncultured, barbaric and violent.

¹ The original version of Chapter One was written for Brunswick News 151 (October 22nd 2023).

² Jews are descendants of Abraham and Sarah's son Isaac, whereas Palestinians - like all Arabs - claim ancestry from Ishmael, Isaac's half-brother and Abraham's first born son by his concubine Hagar. Gentile Christians account themselves as sons and daughters of Abraham because of their spiritual adoption by Jesus, descended from Abraham through the royal line of King David.

³ Strictly speaking, Gaza is hundreds of years older still: a pre-Philistine Canaanite city had previously been built on the site, and was later incorporated into the expanding Egyptian Empire under the New Kingdom (Dynasty XVIII), before the arrival of the Philistines. The very first mention of Gaza in the Hebrew Scriptures comes early in the Book of Genesis, where we are told: 'And the territory of the Canaanites extended from Sidon in the direction of Gerar as far as Gaza and in the direction of Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboiim as far as Lasha.' (Genesis 10:19)

⁴ And whose land was explicitly promised by Yahweh to the Israelites when he spoke to Moses from the Burning Bush: 'So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey—the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites.' (Exodus 3:8)

But that's actually being more than a little unfair to the Philistines. To begin with, the Philistines were a discrete group, quite different and unrelated to the Canaanites.⁵

Although there is still some dispute amongst archaeologists as to their precise origins, the Philistines seem to have been part of a larger group of people known as the 'Sea Peoples' who originated in the Aegean. A whole series of migrations (perhaps precipitated by some great environmental calamity)⁶ took place across the Eastern Mediterranean over the latter half of the 2nd millennium BC, during the final part of the Bronze Age. This was a turbulent period during which the Minoan palaces in Crete were abandoned, to be succeeded by the first Greek civilisation, centred on Mycenae; the Hittite Empire in Asia Minor waxed and waned; and even the Egyptians were assailed by invaders (the aforementioned 'Sea Peoples').⁷ It was against this backdrop that Homer's Trojan War played out. This was also when the Philistines settled the coastal plain of Canaan; whilst a group of slaves referred to by the Egyptians as 'Hapiru' (or Hebrews) escaped, and began the arduous journey that would bring them, like the Philistines, to the land of all those various '-ites.'

By the time the Israelites arrived (c.1200 BC), the Philistines were well-settled in their pentapolis of city-states: each with their own king, but closely allied one to another. During the period of the Judges, they were one of a number of nations that threatened the Israelites. The Philistines fought against one of the last of the Judges, Samson, a man of remarkable strength who memorably was betrayed by Delilah. He was captured, chained and blinded by the Philistines - only to regain his strength sufficiently to bring down the pillars of the temple of Dagon, the chief Philistine god, in Gaza - killing himself, the celebrating Philistine kings and many others besides in the process (Judges 16). A symbol for 'Mutual Assured Destruction' that speaks to us with terrible irony in the midst of the current Hamas-Israel conflict.⁸

The next story involving the Philistines tells of how they captured the Ark of the Covenant⁹ - the most holy artefact to the people of Israel - only to return it after

⁵ The Book of Genesis records two encounters between Abimelech king of Gerar and, respectively, Abraham and Isaac (Genesis 20-21 & 26). 'Abimelech' was a generic Israelite name for all Philistine kings (much like 'Pharaoh' for Egyptian kings); but these stories are anachronistic, given that the Philistines didn't arrive in Canaan until several centuries after Abraham's time.

⁶ This upheaval was possibly related to the destruction of the Aegean island of Thera/Santorini (c.1600-1500 BC) in one of most powerful volcanic explosions in recorded history - and, incidentally, probably the true origin of Plato's Atlantis myth.

⁷ There are references in Egyptian inscriptions from this period to a people known as the 'Peleset', and it has been suggested that this may be a reference to the Philistines.

⁸ 'Samson said, "Let me die with the Philistines!" Then he pushed with all his might, and down came the temple on the rulers and all the people in it. Thus he killed many more when he died than while he lived.' (Judges 16:30)

⁹ The Ark of the Covenant contained the tablets on which were inscribed the Ten Commandments (or Decalogue) given by Yahweh to Moses at Mount Sinai. The Ark would later become the central feature of the Jerusalem Temple built by King David's son and successor, Solomon. According to the Hebrew Scriptures, the Temple was built on Mount Moriah, the traditional site for Jews of the Binding of Isaac (Genesis 22). It's worth noting that Samaritan tradition placed the site of this event on Mount Gerizim, near Shechem (modern Nablus): from the 5th to 2nd centuries BC this was the site of a Samaritan Temple (until destroyed during the Maccabean period - of which more later). See also John 4 for Jesus' debate with a Samaritan woman about the spiritual importance of Mount Gerizim.

Yahweh brought down plague upon them for their impudence (1 Samuel 4-6). They didn't remain quiescent for long: and it is partly in response to the Philistine threat that the Israelites asked Yahweh to give them a king. The first king, Saul, didn't work out too well: he was defeated in battle by the Philistines, and took his own life in despair at Mount Gilboa (1 Samuel 31).

This moment marked the high-water mark for the Philistines. The next king, David, had already as a youth defeated the great Philistine champion Goliath (1 Samuel 17); as king, he finished the task, turned the tables on the Philistine armies, and subjugated the pentapolis of Philistine cities. The Philistines later regained their independence after the United Monarchy of David and Solomon split into the fractious kingdoms of Israel and Judah in around 930 BC (see map), but they never regained their former power and glory, and were absorbed into the Assyrian Empire in around 730 BC (shortly before the fall of Samaria, and the Northern Kingdom of Israel, to Assyria in 722 BC). A short-lived Philistine rebellion against the Assyrians (712-711 BC) was crushed by King Sargon II.



At the end of the following century, the strength of the Assyrian Empire was broken by the rapid ascent of a new superpower within the Ancient Near East: the Neo-Babylonian Empire. In 605 BC the Babylonian commander Nebuchadnezzar defeated the last remnants of the Assyrian army and their Egyptian allies at the

Battle of Carchemish in Syria. The following year Nebuchadnezzar - who was now established as King of Babylon following the death of his father Nabopolassar - swept down the Eastern Mediterranean coast, and sacked the Philistine cities, just as foreseen by the Hebrew prophets. Only a few decades later, the same king levelled the First Jerusalem Temple (c.586 BC), destroyed the Southern Kingdom of Judah and carried the Jews into Exile in Babylon. In the centuries that followed, unlike the Jews (who returned from their Exile and rebuilt both the Temple and city of Jerusalem following the Rise of Persia), the Philistines were absorbed into the general populace of the 'Land between the River and the Sea.'¹⁰

The return from Exile didn't result in the Jews getting everything they desired (the restoration of the Davidic monarchy, for instance): even though the Persians were favourably disposed towards them, that didn't mean they were about to grant the Jews full independence. In the fourth century BC, the entire Persian Empire, including Palestine, came under Greek (Hellenistic) rule, following the conquests of Alexander the Great. In previous centuries, geopolitics had resulted in Palestine being a strategic region fought over by Egyptians on the one hand, and Hittites, Assyrians and Babylonians on the other. Now once again it became a disputed borderland between the rival Hellenistic powers of Ptolemaic Egypt and Seleucid Syria. This culminated in the reign of Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who desecrated the Temple, and oppressed the Jews, leading to the Maccabean Revolt (167-141 BC).¹¹

From the mid-second century BC until the mid-first century BC, the Jews enjoyed a time of self-rule under the Maccabean (or Hasmonean) dynasty. However, the Ascendancy of Rome as the most powerful Empire the ancient world had ever seen brought that brief period of independence to an end, when the Roman general Pompey entered Jerusalem in 63 BC.¹²

¹⁰ Though they did give a new name to that land: Palestine - derived from the name of this extraordinary people.

¹¹ By the time of the Maccabean Revolt, Gaza had been rebuilt and had become a centre of Hellenistic learning. The 1st Book of Maccabees mentions Gaza 14 times (and the 2nd Book of Maccabees once more), sometimes under the alternative name of Gazara. Whereas it is mentioned that the forces of the Jewish rebels were welcomed at nearby Ashkelon, the citizens of Gaza resisted both Jonathan and Simon, the brothers of Judas Maccabeus: 'From there (*Ashkelon*) he (*Jonathan*) went to Gaza, but the people of Gaza shut him out. So he besieged it and burned its suburbs with fire and plundered them' (1 Maccabees 11:61); *and later* 'In those days Simon encamped against Gazara and surrounded it with troops. He made a siege engine, brought it up to the city, and battered and captured one tower. The men in the siege engine leaped out into the city, and a great tumult arose in the city. The men in the city, with their wives and children, went up on the wall with their clothes torn, and they cried out with a loud voice, asking Simon to make peace with them; they said, "Do not treat us according to our wicked acts but according to your mercy." So Simon reached an agreement with them and stopped fighting against them. But he expelled them from the city and cleansed the houses in which the idols were located and then entered it with hymns and praise. He removed all uncleanness from it and settled in it those who observed the law. He also strengthened its fortifications and built in it a house for himself.' (1 Maccabees 13:43-48)

¹² The last of the Hasmoneans remained as client-kings under Rome until 37 BC, when they were supplanted by the first of the Herodian dynasty: Herod the Great (37-4 BC). Herod was of mixed Jewish and Idumean ancestry: the Idumeans were descendants of the Edomites, who traced their lineage back to Esau, elder brother of Jacob. Herod may well have felt insecure as King of Judaea given his mixed ancestry, and this may explain why he reacted so violently, near the end of his reign,

It is against this backdrop that Jesus of Nazareth's life and ministry took place. By his day, the Philistines had long-since passed into memory. However, the story of the land to which they gave their name was far from over: nor indeed was the history of the place that had once been the most powerful of the five Philistine cities.

Gaza.

Chapter Two: Two Thousands Years of Exile¹³

Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (Acts 8:26)



The meeting between Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch on the road to Gaza

In Chapter One, we explored the early history of Gaza, as one of the Philistine cities, and the struggles between Philistines and Israelites recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures: the intertwined destinies of two peoples living in close proximity to one another, within a land that has gone by many different names over its long history - Canaan, Palestine, Israel, the Holy Land.

In Chapter Two, we will focus on the history of the 'Land between the River and the Sea' in the almost two thousand years between the Day of Pentecost following on from the death of Jesus, in around AD 30, and the Balfour Declaration in 1917. There's a lot of ground to cover between these two pivotal events: but this remains, after all, a *Brief History of Gaza, Palestine & Israel*. So let's begin.

There were Jews from many parts of the world who had travelled to Jerusalem in time for the feast of Pentecost that fell fifty days after the death and

towards the perceived threat offered by the birth of a prophesied 'King' in Bethlehem - leading to the Flight of the Holy Family into Egypt and the Massacre of the Innocents (Matthew 2:13-18).

¹³ The original version of Chapter Two was written for Brunswick News 152 (October 29th 2023).

resurrection of Jesus. The list of placenames given in Acts 2 reminds us that the First Jewish Diaspora, or scattering, that had begun with the destruction of Jerusalem and the First Temple in 586 BC, more than six hundred years before, had resulted in communities of Jews putting down deep roots in many different locations across the Eastern Mediterranean and Near Eastern world. From Egypt to Asia Minor, from Babylon to Rome, the presence of Jews was already more widespread than any other ethnic group (with the possible exception of the Greeks and the Romans). However, unlike the Greeks and Romans, they had not come to the diverse lands in which they now dwelt primarily as explorers and conquerors, but rather as wanderers and refugees.

But still there was the historical pull towards the motherland, the cradle of the Jewish people, to Jerusalem and the Second Temple, especially for the three great festival periods through the year of Passover, Pentecost and Sukkot. Much as Muslims from many nations today will travel to Mecca for the Haj - an annual pilgrimage to the holiest site within their faith - so the Jews of the First Diaspora would return to Jerusalem, as and when they were able to do so, as pilgrims during one or other of these three great feasts.¹⁴

Christianity's birth as a world religion began with that first opportunity for the message of the risen, ascended Lord to be preached by His apostles to an audience of Jews dwelling within many nations.¹⁵ Doubtless the very first churches in many different provinces of the Roman Empire were founded by some of those returning Jewish pilgrims in the years that followed.

One of the early missionary initiatives in the wake of Pentecost that the Book of Acts records is that of Philip the Deacon. Acts 8 tells us of an encounter he has on the desert road going down from Jerusalem to Gaza with an Ethiopian eunuch.¹⁶ According to the traditions of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, this individual was the first African to come to faith, and the progenitor of their own church.¹⁷ And it's

¹⁴ One of the reasons why Mecca is regarded as the paramount sacred site within Islam is the belief held by many Muslims that the Mount Moriah mentioned in Genesis 22 is actually a place named Marwa located close to the Kaaba, the stone building found at the centre of Islam's most holy mosque in Mecca. According to most Muslims, it was his firstborn son Ishmael, and *not* Isaac, who was bound by Abraham when his faith was tested.

¹⁵ The first Christian Pentecost can be seen as the 'reverse Babel' (Genesis 11), where people speaking in many tongues communicate not a message of confusion and rivalry, but rather unanimity and love: and the Table of Nations (Genesis 10) is paralleled by the many locations represented at Pentecost.

¹⁶ According to the precepts of the Law, a eunuch could not be one of God's elect: 'No one who has been emasculated by crushing or cutting may enter the assembly of the Lord' (Deuteronomy 23:1). Yet the prophet Isaiah foresees a time when a spirit of inclusion will prevail, allowing eunuchs a place within God's kingdom: 'To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant—to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will endure for ever' (Isaiah 56:4-5). The encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch can be seen as a fulfilment of that prophecy.

¹⁷ Two other traditions of the Ethiopian Church are that the kings of Ethiopia (right down to the last ruler of Ethiopia, Haile Selassie, in the 20th century) were descendants of Makeda, the Queen of Sheba, and King Solomon; and that the Ark of the Covenant, which disappeared from the Biblical narrative following the destruction of the First Temple, is currently held under the custodianship of the Church in the Ethiopian city of Axum.

interesting that Acts 8:26, the verse with which this tale begins, gives us the only reference to Gaza we find in the entire New Testament. We are reminded in its final appearance in Scripture that Gaza is on the physical route from Jerusalem to Egypt. But - in this final instance - it is shown to be on a spiritual route too, taken by both a faithful Christian and an inquiring eunuch, connecting Jerusalem with the mission to Africa, the first step in the expansion of the faith ultimately across an entire continent. This is a last - and hopeful - appearance of Gaza within the Holy Scriptures.

However, what followed in the decades immediately after this encounter on the desert road, for the Jewish people, was nothing short of a disaster. The First Jewish War (AD 66-70) saw the Jews attempting to throw off the yoke of Roman oppression, only for Jerusalem to be sacked, the Second Temple to be destroyed,¹⁸ and the uprising to be crushed.¹⁹ Following a further rebellion (The Bar Kokhba Revolt, AD 132-136), the Jewish people were barred from entering Jerusalem, which became a Roman colony with the name Aelia Capitolina. On the Temple Mount, where once the Temple dedicated to Yahweh had stood, a pagan temple dedicated to Jupiter was built.²⁰

The Second Jewish Diaspora that followed the destruction of the Second Temple was far wider than the First, and resulted in Palestine being denuded of its Jewish population - though, throughout subsequent centuries, small Jewish communities would continue to be established, and re-established. Gaza itself during this period was home to a mixed population of Romans, Greeks, Egyptians, Jews, Persians and Nabateans (Arabs). The majority of the Romanised/Hellenised peoples of Palestine became Christian in the 3rd and 4th centuries. Christian pilgrimage to the Holy Land had its beginnings,²¹ and Jerusalem became one of the five Patriarchates of the Early Church (alongside Rome, Constantinople, Antioch and Alexandria). Unlike the others, each of which was a sizable city and regional centre, Jerusalem remained a provincial backwater. Palestine's population continued to fall, especially during the years when it became a disputed land between the rival East Roman (Byzantine) and Persian Empires. In the early 7th century, the Byzantines momentarily triumphed, only a decade later to lose Jerusalem and Palestine to a new force that had arisen in the Arabian desert: the Islamic Caliphate.²² Following

¹⁸ The only portion of the Second Temple that survives down to the present is the Western Wall (also known as the 'Wailing Wall'), which remains the most holy site for Jews today.

¹⁹ According to the Jewish historian Josephus, the Herodian fortress of Masada was the site of a 'last stand' by Jews who held out against vastly superior Roman forces for three more years after the fall of Jerusalem before the Romans were able to recapture the fortress in AD 73. Almost all the Jewish defenders committed suicide rather than surrender to the Romans. The siege of Masada is often remembered today as a symbol of Jewish heroism.

²⁰ The building of a pagan Roman Temple on the Temple Mount thus mirrors the fate of the Second Temple during the reign of the Seleucid Greek king Antiochus Epiphanes, who profaned the Jewish Temple with pagan sacrifices.

²¹ Encouraged by the supposed discovery of the True Cross by St Helena, the mother of the first Christian Roman Emperor, Constantine the Great. We also know much about the early development of pilgrimage to the Holy Land from the account of a woman named Egeria who journeyed to the holy sites in around AD 381-384. The most holy place for Christians in the Holy Land was the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, containing within its walls the sites of both the Crucifixion and the Resurrection.

²² Islam had its beginnings with the mission to the Arabs undertaken by the prophet Muhammad, who claimed that he had experienced a series of visitations from the angel Gabriel. The revelations that he

the fall of Jerusalem (AD 638), the Al-Aqsa Compound was built on the Temple Mount, and it remains the third most holy site in Islam (after the Arabian cities of Mecca and Medina).²³



received became the basis for the Koran, the holy book of Islam. By the time of his death in AD 632, virtually the whole of Arabia had embraced the new faith. Under his immediate successors (the first Caliphs), the Persian Empire was completely overwhelmed, and the Byzantine Empire quickly lost its holdings in Syria, Palestine, Egypt and North Africa. The Visigothic Kingdom in Spain was next to fall, and only with the victory of Charles Martel at the Battle of Tours (AD 732) in southern France was the Islamic advance into Western Europe halted.

²³ The Dome of the Rock, the oldest surviving piece of Islamic architecture in the world, is one of two mosques located on the Temple Mount (known to Muslims as the Al-Aqsa Compound). It is instantly recognisable because of its shining golden dome. The Dome was built on the site of the Second Jewish Temple, and according to Muslim tradition marks the site of the Night Journey of Muhammad (in which Muhammad journeyed on the back of a Buraq - a magical winged horse - from Mecca to Jerusalem, and then up to heaven and back again).

In the centuries that followed, the character of Palestine changed once again. Peoples of Arab ethnicity moved into Palestine in even greater numbers, and most (though probably not all) of the previous Christian population converted to Islam. However, Palestine was returned to Christian rule following the First Crusade (1096-1099), and four Latin Crusader states were established in the Levant, the largest of which was the Kingdom of Jerusalem (see map). But in 1187 the Seljuk Turk²⁴ leader Saladin recaptured Jerusalem; and over the course of the following century the Crusaders lost their remaining holdings along the Eastern Mediterranean seaboard, culminating in the fall of Acre, their last significant possession, in 1291.²⁵

The few remaining Jews in Palestine, and the larger numbers across the Diaspora, were powerless onlookers (and sometimes victims) in these struggles within their historic homeland between first Byzantines and Persians, then Western Christians and Muslims. The Crusader period also saw the unleashing of antisemitic zeal against Jews in many of the lands of Europe in which they now dwelled.²⁶ The first country to expel Jews entirely was England (1290) by King Edward I on November 1st (All Saints Day). Other countries were to follow suit. In particular, the fall of Granada, the last Muslim stronghold in Spain (1492), led not just the expulsion of the peninsula's remaining Muslims, but also its Jews.

Sometimes anti-Jewish laws were reversed. For example, though Oliver Cromwell remains a controversial figure in English (and especially Irish) history, the Jewish people remain thankful that he revoked the ban on Jews in England in 1656. The return of the Jews to England didn't mean an end to antisemitism, of course: but from the 19th century the focus for the harshest persecution of the Jews moved to Eastern Europe and Russia. The modern Zionist movement - founded on the belief that only in the historic land of their forebears, with a nation of their own, could Jews find respite from persecution - emerged in the 19th century in response to the ongoing series of pogroms and persecutions against Jews in Europe.²⁷

Meanwhile, the land of Palestine remained a (relatively) sparsely-inhabited outlier of the Ottoman Turkish Empire, which from the fall of Constantinople (1453) onwards had emerged as the most powerful Muslim state in Eastern Europe and the

²⁴ The Seljuk Turks had their origins as nomads in Central Asia (the modern-day '-stans'). The Turks converted to Islam, then exploded into the Middle East in the 11th century, defeating the Byzantines at the Battle of Manzikert in 1071, leading to the gradual 'Turkification' of Asia Minor.

²⁵ Nevertheless, a Christian minority remained in Palestine following this period, and even though the majority of Arabs in modern-day Israel and Palestine are Muslims, a significant minority today remain Christian, tracing their heritage back to, at least, the Crusader rule in the 12th century.

²⁶ It's probably no coincidence that this is around the time, in the 13th century, when the legend of the Wandering Jew began to spread around Europe. This rather offensive piece of fiction was based on a tale (completely unattested in Scripture) that a Jew who taunted Jesus on the way to the Crucifixion was then cursed to walk the Earth until the Second Coming. In time the legend (clearly influenced by the story of wanderings of Cain in punishment for the first murder, recorded in Genesis 4) came to be applied not just to an individual Jew but to the Jewish race as a whole, with their troubled, itinerant two-thousand-year-old history following the destruction of the Second Temple seen as encapsulating the 'Wandering Jew' motif. It has been represented many times in art and literature, perhaps mostly famously by French artist Gustave Doré's illustrations of the figure in 1856.

²⁷ Theodor Herzl is generally regarded as the founder of the modern Zionist movement. In his 1896 pamphlet *Der Judenstaat*, he envisioned the founding of a future independent Jewish state during the 20th century; and was the instigator of the First Congress of the World Zionist Organisation in 1897.

Middle East.²⁸ But as the Ottoman Empire declined through the 19th century, Egyptian influence on Palestine in general, and Gaza in particular, increased. A visiting American scholar noted in 1838 that Gaza at that time had a greater population than Jerusalem. However, outbreaks of plague and earthquakes afflicted the city in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Then, in 1915 the Ottoman Empire entered the First World War (on the German side). In 1917 Gaza was the site of three battles as the British, based in Egypt, tried to fight their way into Ottoman-controlled Palestine. After two defeats, the third battle ended in victory for the British under General Allenby. By Christmas, they were in Jerusalem.²⁹

Although the end of the First World War was still a year away, the Balfour Declaration, named after the British Foreign Secretary of the day, was published on November 2nd 1917 (ironically, just one day after the anniversary of King Edward I's expulsion of the Jews from England). In the Declaration, the British government committed itself to supporting a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine.

What happened next? How did we get from Balfour to today? That will be the focus for the final Chapter of this Brief History of Gaza, Palestine & Israel.

Chapter Three: From Balfour to Bibi³⁰

'I will establish your borders from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean Sea, and from the desert to the Euphrates River. I will give into your hands the people who live in the land, and you will drive them out before you.' (Exodus 23:31)

'From the River to the Sea, Palestine shall be free.' (Palestinian protest slogan)

In Chapter Three, after more than three thousand years of history, we will look at one final century of turmoil, conflict, settlement and resettlement, for the peoples laying claim to the Land between the River and the Sea.

British colonial history, as we now acknowledge, is an extremely chequered tale, filled with many morally questionable elements: few more so than the Balfour Declaration of 1917.³¹ The essential conundrum is this: by what right does a newly-occupying colonial power make solemn declarations about the future disposition of a territory that now, for a short period of time, it rules? The British wrestling of control of Palestine from the Ottoman Turks in 1917, confirmed by the

²⁸ Constantinople - the city founded by the first Christian Roman Emperor Constantine - was renamed Istanbul, and the great church of Hagia Sophia - 'Holy Wisdom' - was converted into a mosque. Following the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the building became a museum in 1935 in accordance with the secularisation policies of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, founder of the modern Turkish Republic, only to become a mosque again in 2020 under the current authoritarian president, Recep Erdoğan.

²⁹ As well as moving directly against the Ottoman Turks themselves from their base in Egypt, the British also encouraged the Arabs to challenge Turkish rule. One of the principal leaders of the Arab Revolt (which began in Mecca in 1916) was the British army officer T.E. Lawrence - better known as 'Lawrence of Arabia'.

³⁰ The original version of Chapter Three was written for Brunswick News 153 (November 5th 2023).

³¹ See Appendix B for the full text of the Declaration.

dissolution of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the First World War twelve months later, marked not only the end of four centuries of Ottoman governance of Palestine, but also more than seven hundred years of continuous Muslim rule over the Levant since the Crusader period. Western rule had been restored to the Land between the River and the Sea, this time in the form of the British Palestinian Mandate.³² But for how long?

At the time of the beginning of the Mandate, the vast majority of the population of Palestine was both Arab and Muslim (though there was a smaller Arab Christian cohort). There was also a Jewish population, but it was relatively small (at around 15%), though it had been increasing since the beginning of the Zionist movement in the late 19th century. Over the course of the thirty years of British rule, that Jewish population more than doubled, fueled by migration: a consequence of the increasing hostility towards Jews in Europe, mostly acutely in Germany. That hostility turned to unfettered persecution, and ultimately attempted genocide, during the Second World War. Before the Nazi occupation of most of continental Europe was broken in 1945, 6 million Jews - some two-thirds of the entire pre-war European Jewish population, and about 40% of the world population - had been exterminated in the Holocaust.³³



A group of child survivors behind a barbed wire fence at Auschwitz

³² The term 'Mandate' was used for a territory whose rule had been delegated ('mandated') by the League of Nations (and its eventual successor, the United Nations) to a colonial power, in this case Britain. For all the technical nuance, in practical terms there was little difference between a mandate and a colony.

³³ The name 'Holocaust' is a Greek term, meaning 'burnt offering', applied originally to the sacrificial offerings of the Temple worship. Given the nature of the deaths of many of the victims of the Nazi's attempted 'Final Solution', it's an horrific, painfully ironic name. The preferred term of Jews is the 'Shoah', a Hebrew word meaning 'disaster' or 'calamity'.

With the end of the Second World War, an exhausted and virtually bankrupt Britain, though one of the victors, quickly realised the need to scale back its overseas commitments. After two centuries of growth, the Empire was no longer economically viable. And the logic of the Zionist demand for the Jewish people to have a homeland of their own - as promised by the British in the Balfour Declaration - now seemed inescapable in light of the Holocaust. The United States of America - now undeniably one of only two superpowers on the planet, hosting the largest remaining Jewish population of any country - was likewise committed to the ideal of a Jewish nation. But what was to become of the Arab inhabitants of Palestine - still at that point, despite the influx of Jewish refugees during the Twenties, Thirties and Forties, the two-thirds majority population within the Mandate?³⁴

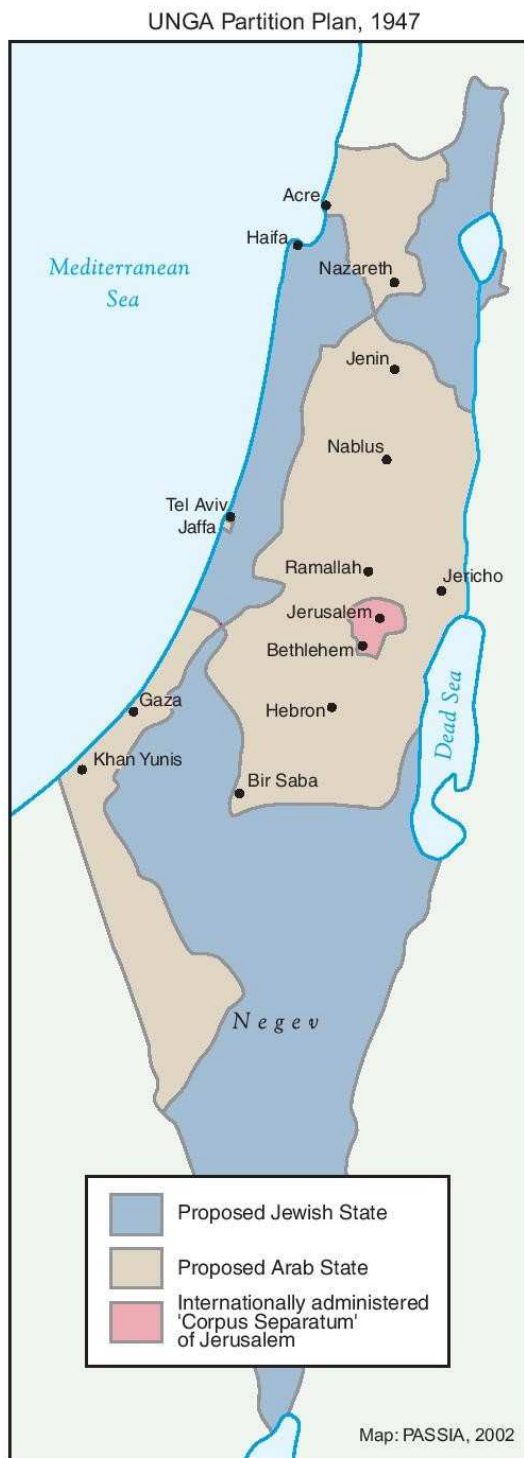
The United Nations - the successor to the failed League of Nations - proposed a 'two state' solution, with a division of the Mandate territory into a Jewish-state and an Arab-state, with 56% being given to the Jewish-state and 43% to the Palestinian-state (with Jerusalem and Bethlehem designated as an enclave under international administration).³⁵ The UN Partition Plan was adopted by the General Assembly in November 1947. It was celebrated by most Jews in Palestine, but rejected by Palestinian Arabs (who saw it as blatantly pro-Zionist, given that the Arab population within the Mandate was twice that of the Jewish population: against this, it was argued that the Negev desert made up a significant portion of the Jewish-state, and offered little scope for settlement or agricultural use). Fighting broke out between the two communities during the final six months of the Mandate, and intensified as the British began preparations for the final withdrawal. The Palestinian Jews declared the State of Israel on May 14th 1948, the day the Mandate expired. The next day, five neighbouring Arab nations (Egypt, Transjordan, Syria, Iraq and Saudi Arabia) declared war on the new Jewish state and invaded the former Mandate.

This First Arab-Israeli War (1948-1949) resulted in a clear victory for the State of Israel. Some 78% of the land of the former Mandate - not the 56% proposed by the UN - was now in Israel's hands (see map). The remaining 22% was divided

³⁴ Pan-Arab nationalism in the first half of the 20th had been frustrated by the British and French, who had secretly drawn up the Sykes-Picot Agreement in 1916 (named after the British and French diplomats respectively who initialled the agreed memorandum). This Agreement divided the Middle Eastern territories of the Ottoman Empire into spheres of British and French influence, and, with some modification, became the basis for British rule over Palestine, Transjordan and Iraq, and French rule over Syria and Lebanon, following the defeat of the Turks. The Sykes-Picot Agreement ran counter to the promises made by the British to their Arab allies for the establishment of a greater Arab state incorporating Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and Transjordan. Together with the Balfour Declaration, the Sykes-Picot Agreement was viewed by Arabs as evidence of both Western perfidy in general, and a bias towards the Zionist cause in particular as tensions grew in the inter-war years between the rising Jewish population in Palestine and the resentful Arab population.

³⁵ The idea of internationally-administered enclaves was not new. After the First World War, the League of Nations had established the Free City of Danzig under its protection and oversight, to be independent of the neighbouring republics of Germany and Poland. However, the very existence of the Free City was one of the grievances used by Adolph Hitler in his ascent to power, and as part of the rationale for the Nazi invasion on Poland that began the Second World War. Somewhat less controversial was the establishment, after the Second World War, of the Free City of Trieste, for which the Security Council of the United Nations had direct responsibility from 1947 to 1954, before the territory was peaceably divided between Italy and Yugoslavia.

between the Gaza Strip (occupied by the Egyptians) and the West Bank of the River Jordan (occupied by the Kingdom of Transjordan, later referred to simply as Jordan). No attempt was made to establish the Palestinian Arabs as a state in their own right: and most Palestinians lost their homes as a result of the conflict, the first of many displacements that they lament as the Nakba (meaning 'Catastrophe'). Jerusalem itself was split between an Israeli-occupied West and a Jordanian-occupied East. The UN Partition Plan was in tatters.



A Second Arab-Israeli War (1956) was fought when Israel allied itself with Britain and France against Egypt in their attempts to regain control of the Suez Canal (which had just been nationalised by Egyptian President Nasser). The War was a partial success for Israel (which briefly occupied the Sinai peninsula), but a complete disaster for the British and French. The decisive diplomatic intervention by US President Eisenhower on Egypt's side resulted in a humiliating climbdown for the other Western powers. The Suez Crisis destroyed the premiership of Anthony Eden, and served as the final confirmation that the Age of Empire (at least for the British and the French) was now over.

More significant for Israel and Palestine long-term was the Third Arab-Israeli War (1967), also known as the Six Days War. The shortest, and most decisive of the conflicts, this resulted in a calamitous rout for the armies of Egypt, Jordan and Syria by the Israeli Defence Force (IDF). The Egyptians were driven out of the Gaza Strip and Sinai, the Jordanians from the West Bank and East Jerusalem, and the Syrians from the Golan Heights to the east of the Sea of Galilee. So dramatic was the outcome of this conflict that it has often been said: 'God created the world in six days: in 1967, the State of Israel changed the world in six days.' For the first time in 1,900 years, since the First Jewish War against the Romans, Jews were in complete control of Jerusalem.³⁶

However, six years later (1973), a surprise Arab attack beginning on the Jewish holy day of Yom Kippur led to the Fourth Arab-Israeli War (the Yom Kippur War). This came close to being a disaster for Israel. However, after initial losses, the IDF turned the tide, and the invading Egyptian and Syrian forces were repulsed. The status quo following the 1967 War was restored.³⁷ However, in the immediate aftermath of the War, a Saudi-led Arab oil embargo against those Western nations perceived to be supporters of Israel resulted in a four-fold increase in global oil prices (from \$3 to \$12 a barrel) over a six-month period.³⁸

³⁶ The Jordanians retained administrative control as 'custodians' of the Al-Aqsa Compound on the Temple Mount. This has allowed Muslims to continue to visit this site for prayer in the decades since the Six Days War. However, the status of the site remains highly sensitive to the present day. At times of particular tension, the Israeli authorities have restricted Muslim access to the Compound, often only serving to exacerbate ill-feeling further. Even worse have been incidents of violence stemming from Jewish 'incursions' upon the Temple Mount at various times (perceived as highly provocative by many Muslims). Some Jewish religious extremists agitate for the destruction of the two mosques on the Temple Mount, and for the building of a Third Jewish Temple, which they believe will inaugurate the Messianic Age. Some Christian fundamentalists (notably in the US) also support this for their own reasons, believing that the building of the Third Temple is a necessary precondition for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

³⁷ The political consequences of the Yom Kippur War severely damaged the standing of the Israeli Prime Minister, Labor Party leader Golda Meir, and she resigned as PM in 1974. Israeli politics shifted towards the right in the elections that followed (in 1977), ending almost three decades of dominance by the left, with the ascent of a new party, Likud. It remains to be seen how Likud and its current leader, PM Benjamin Netanyahu, will fair politically after his equally disastrous shortsightedness.

³⁸ The 1973 Oil Crisis was followed by a second Oil Crisis in 1979 following the overthrow of the Shah of Iran during the Iranian Islamic Revolution. The economic importance of the Middle East, and the vulnerabilities of the Western world to volatilities in the oil market, was fully demonstrated by these events. Although the dominance of the Arab-led OPEC (Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries) within the energy market has waned somewhat in the 21st century (after increased oil and gas production in the US and Russia in particular), it still accounts for 30% of global oil production.

Then came the Camp David Accords in 1978, resulting in a peace treaty between Egypt and Israel: the first such peace treaty and normalisation of relations between Israel and one of its Arab neighbours. The IDF initiated a phased withdrawal from Sinai, which was completed in 1982 (though Gaza remained occupied by the Jewish State).³⁹ Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, although there were conflicts between Israel and Lebanon,⁴⁰ and the First Palestinian Intifada or 'uprising' (1987-1993), there was also a parallel peace process, between Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO)⁴¹ and its sponsors in the wider Arab world on the one hand, and Israel on the other.



³⁹ This diplomatic triumph, brokered by US President Jimmy Carter, resulted in Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and Israeli PM Menachem Begin sharing the 1978 Nobel Peace Prize. However, Sadat's willingness to conclude a peace treaty with Israel led directly to his assassination three years later by the terrorist group Egyptian Islamic Jihad. As for Carter, the Iranian Revolution and the subsequent hostage-taking of 52 American diplomats and citizens following the storming of the US embassy in Tehran cast a terrible shadow over the final year of his presidency, and contributed to his defeat by Ronald Reagan in 1980.

⁴⁰ Although most of the population of Lebanon is Arab, it is extremely diverse religiously, with roughly three-quarters of the population divided - in almost equal proportions - between Sunni Muslim, Shia Muslim and Maronite Christian groups, and the remaining quarter made up of smaller Muslim and Christian groups, plus the Druze (an esoteric Abrahamic religion that is almost unique to Lebanon and Syria, though with smaller numbers living in Israel and elsewhere). The strongly sectarian nature of Lebanon combined with weak central government led to a Civil War (1975-1990), complicated by a Syrian military occupation of much of the north and east of the country (1976-2005), a War with Israel (1982) followed by an Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon (1985-2000), and the kidnapping of over a hundred Western nationals over the course of a decade-long hostage crisis (1982-1992). Hezbollah, an Iranian-backed militant Shia group, emerged as a powerful political and paramilitary force after the 1982 War, and in the 21st century has been involved in a further War with Israel (2006), as well as intervening in the Syrian Civil War (2011 onwards).

⁴¹ The Palestinian Liberation Organisation was founded in 1964. Although sponsored by the Arab League, and given observer status at the UN in 1974, many Western governments, most notably the US, were for many years hostile to what was seen as a terrorist organisation dedicated to the elimination of the State of Israel. For 35 years, from 1969 until his death in 2004, the Chairman of the PLO Executive Committee was Yasser Arafat.

The 'two state' solution first envisaged by the UN partition plan - though now using the pre-1967 borders as the basis - was back on the table. The Oslo Accords (1993 & 1995), and the signing of a peace treaty between Israel and Jordan, offered hope for an end to the conflict. In 1994 Arafat and Israeli PM Yitzhak Rabin (pictured with US President Bill Clinton), were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, like Sadat and Begin before them. But the assassination of Rabin on Nov 4th 1995 by a Jewish extremist was a severe setback for the talks.

In the almost thirty years since, the situation has deteriorated. Although the IDF withdrew from Gaza in 2005, the building of illegal Jewish settlements within the West Bank continued. The Second Palestinian Intifada (2000-2005) led to Israel building the Separation Barrier, enclosing many of the settler enclaves, disrupting the Palestinian economy, and effectively isolating about 10% of Palestinian territory on the West Bank from the rest. Limited self-government was given to the West Bank and Gaza: but the rivalry between Fatah (the political wing of the PLO) and Hamas soon led to conflict.⁴²

In 2007 Hamas took control of Gaza, leaving Fatah in control of the West Bank. The administration of Fatah and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in the West Bank has been widely denounced as corrupt; but the murderous fanaticism of Hamas in Gaza is far worse. In response to repeated rocket attacks from Hamas, the Israeli government has responded with devastating counter-strikes of its own; and it has enclosed Gaza in a tight noose, blockading it by air, land and sea for a decade and a half. In turning Gaza into what has been called an 'open prison', Israel has been tacitly aided by the Egyptians, fighting their own battle against insurgents in Sinai, and clearly fearing the consequences of a refugee crisis on their border.

The worsening political situation right across the Middle East over the past two decades has not helped. The 9/11 Attacks, the Iraq War, the Arab Spring, the Syrian Civil War, the emergence of ISIS, the regional rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and the return of Cold War-style proxy politics; these have all complicated and undermined the work of those who believe in the peace process. The rise of populist leaders in many places has been another stumbling block: and in Benjamin 'Bibi' Netanyahu, leader of the right-wing Likud Party, and a powerful force in Israeli politics since 1996, we have a prime example of just such a figure.⁴³

⁴² Hamas was founded in 1987 after the beginning of the First Intifada by Ahmed Yassin, an almost blind quadriplegic who served as the movement's spiritual leader until he was killed by a missile fired by an Israeli helicopter gunship in 2004. The roots of Hamas can be traced back to the Muslim Brotherhood, a powerful Sunni Islamist movement that emerged in Egypt between the World Wars. Its foundational Charter, published in 1988, states that 'our struggle against the Jews is very great and very serious' and calls for the eventual creation of an Islamic state in Palestine, in place of Israel and the Palestinian Territories, and the obliteration or dissolution of Israel (affirming a desire to 'raise the banner of Allah over every inch of Palestine, for under the wing of Islam followers of all religions can coexist in security and safety where their lives, possessions and rights are concerned'). When the Charter was revised in 2017, some optimistic commentators suggested it represented a moderating of Hamas' stance, moving it from a clearly antisemitic position to one that would be better characterised as anti-Zionist. Against that, critics point (for example) to a statement the current Hamas leader, Fathi Hamad, made in 2019: 'You should attack every Jew possible in all the world and kill them'.

⁴³ Likud, rather like Hamas, has an uncompromising political message in its foundational documents. Founded in 1973 shortly before the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War, it quickly capitalised on the grave

Until recently, the consensus across most of the international community was to regard the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, following the 1967 War, as illegal. Most countries maintained their embassies in Tel Aviv, and rejected the 1980 Jerusalem Law, passed by the Knesset (the Israeli Parliament), recognising the annexation of East Jerusalem, and the declaration of the (unified) city of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. However, in accordance with the wishes of President Trump, in December 2017 the US gave recognition to Jerusalem as the capital of Israel; and on May 14th 2018 - the 70th anniversary of the creation of the State of Israel - the American embassy in Israel was relocated to Jerusalem.

Donald Trump's administration also mediated the Abraham Accords, signed in September 2020, which normalised relations between the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain and the State of Israel: the first instance of a recognition of the State of Israel by an Arab nation since the peace treaty between Israel and Jordan signed in 1995.

This brings us to the present. 2023 had already been a tumultuous year for Israel and Palestine, even before the cataclysmic events of October 7th. The new Israeli government, the most right-wing in the history of the State of Israel, came under attack domestically, with huge marches on the streets protesting against its plans to emasculate the Supreme Court (the bastion of the State's democracy in the absence of a formal constitution). Meanwhile, violence between Jewish settlers and Palestinians on the West Bank continued to heighten, whilst the fragmentation of Palestinian neighbourhoods (in a manner not unlike the Bantustans of apartheid South Africa) proceeded unabated. Yet the optimists were encouraged by signs that Saudi Arabia was almost ready to sign up to the Abraham Accords, and recognise the State of Israel. On October 2nd, Jake Sullivan, national security adviser to President Joe Biden, asserted that: 'The Middle East region is quieter today than it has been in two decades,' and that the Biden administration had 'de-escalated crises in Gaza.' Needless to say, his comments have not aged well.⁴⁴

insecurities felt by many Israelis in the aftermath of that conflict. It won its first decisive election victory in 1977. The original party platform for 1977 contained these opening words: 'The right of the Jewish people to the land of Israel (Eretz Israel) is eternal and indisputable and is linked with the right to security and peace; therefore, Judea and Samaria will not be handed to any foreign administration; between the Sea and the Jordan there will only be Israeli sovereignty. A plan which relinquishes parts of western Eretz Israel, undermines our right to the country, unavoidably leads to the establishment of a "Palestinian State," jeopardises the security of the Jewish population, endangers the existence of the State of Israel, and frustrates any prospect of peace.' In political terms, Likud offers a seeming mirror image to the aspirations of Hamas. Those looking for Scriptural support for Likud's position can certainly find it (if they wish). But 'even the devil can quote the Bible for his own purpose' (*The Merchant of Venice*, Act 1, Scene 3).

⁴⁴ There's no doubt that part of Hamas' motivation in launching its monstrous attack - the biggest loss of life in a single day in post-Holocaust Jewish history - was to derail the rapprochement between Israel and Saudi Arabia. The Abraham Accords amounted to individual Arab nations seeking peace with Israel without addressing the Palestine question: bypassing the most dominant issue of the last century of the Middle East's fraught history might be convenient for Americans, Israelis and (some) Arab states alike, but it was never going to do anything other than enrage Hamas (and its Iranian sponsors, Saudi Arabia's main regional rival). It will also undoubtedly have served, in President Putin's eyes, as a welcome distraction for the West, taking away focus from the ongoing War between Ukraine and Russia.

As I type these words (on November 4th 2023), 28 years have passed - to the day - since the tragic death of Yitzhak Rabin at the hands of a fanatic. And 28 days have passed since individuals equally motivated by blind fanaticism initiated this latest cycle of violence between two peoples. What happens next? Can there be any hope? Only when the legitimate aspirations of two peoples are acknowledged; and only when the need for peace and justice, security and prosperity, for Israeli and Palestinian alike, are met. Only when the way is found for both Jew and Arab to know that in the Land between the River and the Sea, Both can be Free.⁴⁵ There can be no other way. There can be no lasting military solution to this conflict, only a political one. And so the search for Peace - Shalom - Salam - must continue, however hard, however long, that search may be: until one day the City of Peace - Jerusalem - will finally live up to the meaning of its name.



Protesters marching through London: November 11th (Armistice Day) 2023

⁴⁵ The use of the slogan 'From the River to the Sea, Palestine shall be free' in Pro-Palestinian protest marches in Britain and elsewhere has become controversial, and leaves many feeling uneasy. Is it a straightforward cry for freedom? Is it an antisemitic slogan? Or is it anti-Zionist? I think the answer to those questions depends on what exactly the user means by it. It can be interpreted as supporting a one-state solution in which both Jew and Arab have an equal voice, and equal freedoms and opportunities - unrealistic as that solution, frankly, is at present. It could be interpreted as a call for a two-state solution in which two peoples are able to enjoy freedom, peace and security, however the exact borders between them fall, from one end of the geographical land from the Jordan to the Mediterranean. This remains the best hope for long-term peace, however difficult and painful the journey. The third option is that it, chillingly, is a call for the destruction of Israel and the expulsion or extermination of Jews. The events of October 7th, surely, left us in no doubt that this remains the intention of Hamas: in full accord with the principles of their foundational Charter. But Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud is just as forthright in its desire for a Jewish State in which there can be no home for Palestinians. Between the Sea and the Jordan, there'll be no room for anything other than Israel: meaning, ultimately, no West Bank, no Gaza and a second Nakba even more comprehensive than the first. So, what exactly are people calling for? What do they want? What does the slogan mean? It depends who you ask: and regrettably, as we have seen over the Remembrance weekend in the UK, sensitivities about the slogan, and the right to protest peaceably, have been seized upon by divisive political figures who seem more interested in courting controversy to further their own agendas, rather than doing anything constructive to alleviate the genuine pain, anger and fear felt by members of the Jewish and Palestinian communities in the UK right now.

Post-script: The Omphalos⁴⁶

In the last days the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as the highest of the mountains; it will be exalted above the hills, and peoples will stream to it. Many nations will come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the temple of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.' The law will go out from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He will judge between many peoples and will settle disputes for strong nations far and wide. They will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war any more. Everyone will sit under their own vine and under their own fig-tree, and no one will make them afraid, for the Lord Almighty has spoken. All the nations may walk in the name of their gods, but we will walk in the name of the Lord our God for ever and ever. (Micah 4:1-5)

When I went on Pilgrimage to the Holy Land some years ago, amongst all the many remarkable sites one that stuck in my mind was the Omphalos in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The Greek word ὀμφᾶλος means 'navel', and the original Omphalos was stone artefact at Delphi, home of the famous Oracle. The ancient Greeks believed that Delphi was the geographical centre of the world - the very 'navel' of the world.

For Christians, the centre of the world had to be the spot where Jesus was crucified and resurrected: the location marked now by the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. So it was only natural that, for us, an Omphalos stone should be located here. This, for us, was the very navel - the birthplace - of our faith. It is for this reason that mediaeval cartographers - like the makers of the Mappa Mundi housed in Hereford Cathedral - should put Jerusalem at the centre of their maps, the navel of the world.



⁴⁶ This Post-Script, together with the Revised and Expanded Version of this *Brief History*, was written in the days leading up to Remembrance Sunday Nov 12th 2023.

Devout Jews likewise agreed that the centre of the world was in Jerusalem. But they placed it a short distance away from the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. For them, it could only be on the Temple Mount. Here was located the Foundation Stone which marked the spot where Creation began, where the substitutionary sacrifice for Abraham's son Isaac was made, where the Ark of Covenant rested and where Yahweh met his people in the Temple. And for Muslims too, the Foundation Stone - this Rock - was important, marking the place from which Muhammad journeyed to heaven, the site of the Dome of the Rock today.

Here - in Jerusalem - lies the Omphalos - the navel of the Holy Land, the navel of the Middle East, the spiritual and cosmological centre of the world.

The importance of Jerusalem cannot be overstated. Historically, connecting it with the long rich history of the Fertile Crescent, the cradle of civilisation. Geographically, a meeting point between West and East, North and South, the crossing point for the three continents of the Old World. Culturally, the birthplace of two Abrahamic religions, and of immense importance to the third. Economically, close to the jugular vein for maritime trade that is the Suez Canal, and close to the biggest concentration of oil wells that still drive the motor of our global economy in the 21st century. Politically, the site of more battles and more struggles than anywhere else on the planet: is it any wonder that Jesus wept for this city?

Jerusalem matters to us all. The fates of Israel and Palestine, Jerusalem and Gaza, are inextricably tied to one another, and inextricably tied to our own.

I began this *Brief History* with the (somewhat depressing) words of some of the prophets. But I end with the more hopeful message of another prophet, Micah of Jerusalem. They are words that are often quoted at Remembrance-tide. They will have been spoken again in, in countless places, in Britain, across Europe, across the world, this weekend: in acts of remembrance held at National Cenotaphs, on village greens, before the Menin Gate, alongside war graves surrounded by fields of poppies. They may well have been spoken by hardened veterans upon the muddy battlefield in Ukraine, and prayed by sad and despairing souls amongst the ruins of Gaza.

What seems most important to me (as I read these words) - and why I prefer Micah's version to the similar prophecy found in Isaiah 2 - is the sense of acceptance that each *must* be allowed to worship their own God, in their own way. All will sit under their *own* vine, and *own* fig-tree, and no one will know fear in so doing. Live and let live. Accept, and learn, from one another. No forced assimilation, no forced conversion in the face of the sword, or looking down the barrel of a gun. No crusade, no jihad. No wars over water, no exploitation of scarce resources, no battles over land, or territory, or sacred space. All worship their own God, as all worship the One God. And from the river to the sea, from mountain height to valley depth, all at last will be free.

Still we, and they, wait and yearn for the fulfilment of these words. One day, they will come true. Even so Lord, Quickly Come: and usher in your Kingdom of Peace.

Appendix A: Prayers for Israel-Palestine (from the Methodist Church website)

(A prayer based on Isaiah 65:17-25)

How can we call a land “Holy” when a festival site becomes a killing ground and a hospital becomes a grave? Christ, have mercy upon the land of your birth and all who know it as home. May the prophecy of Isaiah find fruition in this time and place:

*No more shall infants live but a few days
or the lives of older people be cut short.
No more shall weeping and distress echo across the plains.
No more shall children be borne for calamity.
Let houses be built and lived in.
Let vineyards be planted and enjoyed.
Let enemies come and eat together
and the days of hurt and destruction be over.*

In Jesus’ name we pray

Amen

(A prayer from the Methodist Peace Fellowship)

Oh Jerusalem, how we long for all peoples to be gathered up under the wings of peace and yet your heart is shattered and your sides pierced by swords of grief. Beloved city, may mercy and justice walk in your streets and markets, show us how to look into each other's eyes with love and equity so that all humanity might die to violence and live to trust our neighbours once again.

(A prayer from the President and Vice-President of Conference)

God of peace and compassion,
We pray for all impacted by the escalation in conflict in Israel-Palestine
For all who are mourning
For all who are fearful, today, and for what may lie ahead
For all traumatised and re-traumatised by what they have experienced.
Enable us to stand in solidarity with people of peace
May your Spirit bring peace and healing to your troubled world

Amen

Appendix B: The Full Text of the Balfour Declaration⁴⁷

Foreign Office,

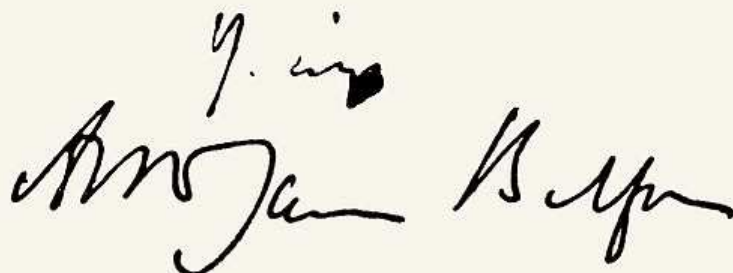
November 2nd, 1917.

Dear Lord Rothschild,

I have much pleasure in conveying to you, on behalf of His Majesty's Government, the following declaration of sympathy with Jewish Zionist aspirations which has been submitted to, and approved by, the Cabinet

"His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country"

I should be grateful if you would bring this declaration to the knowledge of the Zionist Federation.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "A. J. Balfour". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small flourish above the first name.

⁴⁷ As can be seen, the letter was addressed to Lord Rothschild, a prominent leader of the British Jewish community, for transmission to the Zionist Federation of Great Britain and Ireland.