21 *The United States and the Holy Land in the nineteenth century*

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INTRODUCTION

The writing of history nowadays is becoming increasingly difficult. Despite the cumulative availability of primary sources and the marked growth in such technical aids as xerography, microfilm and computers at the service of historians, preconceptions and political passions frequently obscure the issues. In our own case, it is sometimes argued that since all Great Powers were very actively involved in the power politics of the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century, the United States must have been involved as well. Alternatively, it is believed that since the United States became politically involved in Middle Eastern affairs in the twentieth century, with particular emphasis on Palestine, this must have been the case in the nineteenth century as well.

This chapter examines the nature of US involvement in Palestine during the nineteenth century. It commences with a brief account of American interests in the Holy Land in preceding years, then proceeds to focus on the growth of these interests and its ramifications during the nineteenth century, pointing out the change which occurred early in the twentieth century.

BACKGROUND

The Holy Land constituted a component of North American spiritual awareness even before the United States achieved independence, continuing its influence subsequently as well. Several manifestations of this phenomenon are evident.[1]

The biblical heritage

In the American tradition of the Colonial era, the Bible was a potent cohesive factor. The individual outlook of puritans and pilgrims, their family life and social gatherings, political organisations and spiritual views were all permeated by biblical influence. The

adoption of personal and place names with a biblical origin was very widespread. There are, for instance, 27 towns and countries called Salem, as well as 15 Zions. In one such town, Zion City, Illinois, all streets bear biblical names. Indeed, the Bible was the most widely-read book at that time, an intimately known and prized inheritance. When the US Congress, early in its career, voted to appropriate funds for the import of 20 000 Bibles, it was doubtlessly acting in this tradition.[2]

The Hebrew language

The special role played by the Hebrew language was probably due to this biblical influence. While one may doubt the authenticity of the story that Hebrew, along with Greek, was considered as a substitute official language, Hebrew was revered nonetheless in its religious and later its scholarly contexts. Incorporated into the seals of several major universities, Hebrew was considered *de rigueur* for a well-educated person and consequently declared mandatory for some time in the curricula of several universities, such as Yale. In general, however, Hebrew remained part of curricula at theological faculties and schools alone, thereby becoming of prime concern mostly to religious-minded persons both within and without those schools, as exemplified in the efforts of Joseph Smith, the founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints (the Mormons), to study Hebrew and promulgate it among his flock.[3] Since the end of the eighteenth century, Hebrew has been studied increasingly in departments of Semitics at American universities as well.

Visiting the Holy Land

Up to the end of the eighteenth century, there was little American travel to Palestine. Such voyages were expensive, time-consuming and even dangerous; most Americans could hardly afford them and were preoccupied with their own concerns, namely the creation of a new polity, society and economy. The nineteenth century, on the other hand, witnessed a visible growth in travel by Americans (and others) to the Holy Land, for religious pilgrimages, commercial transactions, or simple curiosity, as travel became cheaper, safer, quicker and more comfortable (via ocean liner). To borrow a term from Ben-Arieh, this era marked "the rediscovery of the Holy Land."[4] Many of the tourists and pilgrims were saddened by the barren landscape they encountered,[5] although others perceived beauty beyond the desolation. Several recorded and published their impressions, thus stirring up further interest in various circles.[6] Mark Twain's *Innocents Abroad* may be the best-known of these works.

Settling in the Holy Land

Palestine, a small, poor country which was merely a remote backwater of the Ottoman Empire during the nineteenth century, could offer no incentive but the ideological one for any American or other Westerner to settle or even reside there for an extended period of time. Hence religious conviction was the prime mover for missionaries and other Christians to move to Palestine. The former established schools and hospitals, in Jerusalem and elsewhere. Other notable examples are those of agricultural colonies set up by Clarinda Minor (in 1853) and by George Jones Adams and 156 colonists from Maine (in 1866) — both near Jaffa — and by the Spafford Vester family, which established the so-called American Colony in Jerusalem (at the end of the century),[7] essentially a philanthropic institution. Since the 1880s, Jewish agricultural settlement of Palestine began in earnest, in the name of another ideology, Zionism. Small groups of American Jews joined the settlers who wished to reclaim the land and live on it by dint of hard, physical labour.

THE UNITED STATES AND THE HOLY LAND IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The brief background presented here largely explains the trends and interests which conditioned attitudes of individuals and groups of Americans towards the Holy Land. In contrast, the United States' Administration, although not uninfluenced by the above-mentioned factors, appears to have approached Palestine in a manner dictated by its perception of an absence of any vital economic, political or military interest. This remained true throughout the nineteenth century, even though some Soviet and Arab historians have unsuccessfully attempted to extrapolate United States' Middle Eastern interests from the twentieth century into the nineteenth.[8]

Having considered the role of the Holy Land in American awareness, we proceed to focus on American interests and presence in the Holy Land during the nineteenth century.

The economic element

The nineteenth century witnessed a marked increase in US commerce with other countries. Free trade was indeed consistent with individual enterprise and the liberty of commerce, which were perceived as basic rights. The growth of American commerce chiefly meant exporting wheat to the Ottoman Empire and buying Izmir figs and raisins from Turkey and dates from the Arab lands. In time, other products were added to both imports and exports. By 1900, American exports to the Ottoman Empire reached the modest amount of $500 000 per year; imports were evidently higher, but still less than $7 000 000 annually.[9] Little to none of this commerce concerned Palestine. On the one hand, Palestine had little to sell during most of the nineteenth century, except for limited quantities of sesame and oranges, none of which were exported to the United States; on the other hand, Palestine's inhabitants could hardly afford to buy much (those who were able to do so purchased the desired items from local trading centres, especially Damascus). Moreover, the country had no deep-water harbour, nor any sizable seashore town to attract any but the occasional visit of an American ship. It was only during the early twentieth century — more accurately, in 1908–1913 — that so-called "dollar diplomacy" could first be perceived in the Ottoman Empire (although not in the Holy Land). At that time, a group of American investors, headed by Admiral Colby M. Chester (hence the usual appellation of

"The Chester Project") unsuccessfully attempted to obtain railroad concessions.[10] This matter, however, is outside the scope of this chapter.

Political and military elements

These elements appear to have been absent from the range of American interests in the Holy Land throughout the nineteenth century. The very rare visits of US Navy ships hardly signify any sustained military interests. One characteristic example is provided during the Crimean War: in 1853 the US Consul in Beirut asked the American Government to dispatch warships to Syria. During one of those visits, in 1854, carbines were distributed, for defensive purposes, to Americans who had founded an agricultural establishment near Jaffa. Political matters were expressed chiefly in the appointment of United States Consuls and Vice-Consuls, although (as indicated below) such appointments signified little if any political involvement at that time. Evidently, US political activity focused on the moves of American diplomats in Istanbul,[11] among whom Palestine was an infrequently discussed topic. Indeed, American consular agents in Palestine spent much of their time, in the words of Frank Manuel, "protecting travellers, . . . furthering the work of the Protestant missionaries and their schools, and protesting outrages against Christians and Jews."[12]

The first US Consul in Jerusalem was Warder Cresson, nominated in 1844. However, regular appointments began only after the end of the Crimean War, in 1856, beginning with John Warren Gorham. There were 14 consular appointments (Gorham included) between 1856 and 1900, i.e. an average of about three years for each term of office. Actually, several Consuls served for only a year or less. In Jaffa, where Lazarus M. Murad, a convert to Christianity, was nominated Vice-Consul in 1865, there were eight different Vice-Consuls (Murad included) between 1865 and 1900, or an average of just over four years per term of office. These relatively short spans were not conducive to acquisition of expertise, particularly because nearly all these functionaries were unfamiliar with Ottoman affairs or the special conditions of Palestine, which they knew mostly from reading the Old and New Testaments. Despite these circumstances, however, many proceeded to intervene in local affairs, frequently using their own judgement to bridge over the great distance between their post and Washington. A recent unpublished Ph.D. thesis at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem has examined the involvement of US Consuls in nineteenth century Palestine in Jewish affairs,[13] largely reflecting their overall activities as well, which may be broadly divided into general and specific categories.

General activities

While the nature of the activities of US Consuls in Palestine varied according to the immediate circumstances, the term of office and the character of the incumbent, many such activities revolved around the protection of American citizens through both economic assistance and direct intervention on their behalf. Several of the Consuls in Jerusalem considered it their duty to apply this protection to non-American Christians and Jews in the Holy Land, particularly if they were stateless or Ottoman subjects liable to harsh treatment. Here libertarian and humanitarian sentiments combined with a desire to increase the number of the Consulate's protégés (a process then in progress at certain Consulates of other Powers as well). One instance — although by no means exceptional — was the granting of American protégé status in 1870 to several Jews in Palestine by Richard Beardsley (the United States' Consul in Jerusalem from 1870 to 1873), who obviously stretched the interpretation of their right to obtain it.[14] In several cases, such protection was granted without appropriate reference to Washington. In others, US Consuls in Palestine tried hard to obtain funds for the needy and destitute, mostly among the Christians and Jews, even if they were non-Americans. Again, these were largely private initiatives, rarely approved or funded by the United States Government.[15]

Settlers, archaeologists and missionaries

More particularly, however, United States representatives in the Holy Land aided and protected US citizens throughout the nineteenth century, including the rare American tourist who was molested physically or robbed. More frequently, however, US Consuls had to intervene in favour of American settlers, archaeologists and mostly missionaries. Owing to unsafe conditions in parts of the country and the labyrinthine intricacies of Ottoman bureaucracy, the United States representatives in Palestine had much more trouble with the few Americans there than their small number warranted.

American settlers in Palestine were not numerous, but they were undoubtedly dedicated, having exchanged the relative comforts of life in the United States for the hardships awaiting them in the Holy Land. As noted above, religious convictions motivated Clarinda Minor and others to establish an agricultural colony in Jaffa, in 1853. In 1866, a larger Millenarian group, mostly from Maine, came to settle there under the leadership of a mystic named George Jones Adams; a nucleus of the latter group moved to Jerusalem and became part of the above-mentioned American Colony there, which gradually grew to 150 persons, all Christians (mostly Protestants). However, modest numbers of American Jews came to settle in the Holy Land as well, chiefly during the latter part of the nineteenth century. In 1879, American Jews in Jerusalem set up a separate community with its own synagogue.

Religious sentiment was compounded by intellectual curiosity in ancient civilisations among archaeologists who would later define themselves as "Biblical Archaeologists". An important part of the field work of American (and some other) archaeologists in nineteenth-century Palestine consisted of mapping. The best-known of these Americans was Dr Edward Robinson, Professor of Biblical Literature at Union Theological Seminary in New York. In 1838 he toured Palestine together with another American, Eli Smith (an industrious missionary, educator and publisher of Arabic works).[16] The new scientific maps he prepared with painstaking accuracy on various aspects of biblical archaeology constituted a turning point in the cartography of Palestine.[17] Somewhat later, in 1870, a group of Americans set up the American Palestine Exploration Society in New York, emulating the archaeological and cartographical work of the Palestine Exploration Fund

which the British had founded several years previously. In 1873, a delegation of the American Palestine Exploration Society mapped Palestine, west of the Jordan River, and produced 12 sheets covering some 500 square miles each, together comprising about 150 formerly unrecorded place names.[18] Finally, in 1900, the American School for Oriental Research was established in Jerusalem; it served as the focus for biblical archaeology studies by Americans.

Even more than settlers and archaeologists-cartographers, Protestant missionaries emphasised the American presence in nineteenth-century Palestine. Missionary activity in Palestine was part of a much larger effort to evangelise the world, co-ordinated in the first half of the century by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (incorporated in 1812). In 1819, the Board which represented chiefly Congregationalists and Presbyterians, sent the first two delegates to study conditions for missionary work within the Ottoman Empire.[19] Within a few years, a base was established in Beirut, with stations fanning out into Palestine, where the focus of activity was, not unexpectedly, Jerusalem. The Board's delegate, Levi Parsons, actually resided in Jerusalem for several months in 1821. In 1824 Reverends Pliny Fisk and Isaac Bird were arrested there for selling Bibles to Armenian pilgrims. A year later Fisk's death was followed by suspension of the Protestant missionary effort in Palestine. The station was reopened, in 1834, by William McClure Thomson and his bride Eliza and discontinued again nine years later. The activities of American Protestant missionaries in Palestine continued somewhat sporadically, bolstered by visits from the base in Beirut. They were undoubtedly hampered by their late arrival into the Ottoman Empire and consequent lack of the legal status of a *millet*, or officially approved religious group (a status already held by several other Christian communities, the Muslims and the Jews). The American Protestants confined themselves to circulating Bibles, teaching and tending to the sick and the poor. Most of these efforts were directed at other Christian denominations and not at Muslims (to avoid conflict with the Ottoman Administration) and only slightly towards Jews (a fairly closed religious community at that time).

Ottoman response

Throughout the nineteenth century, the Ottoman Central Government in Istanbul considered the United States as having no direct interests in its Empire — in sharp contradistinction to the major European Powers. However, the Government maintained some reservations about certain American activities in the Holy Land and acted accordingly. This matter has been considered elsewhere in some detail by myself,[20] based on Ottoman sources. Here, we cite only the main points.

For the first three-quarters of the century, the Ottoman Empire still maintained a semblance of political and military power. Several of the sultans who reigned during that period even attempted to institute reforms from above. Nevertheless, they remained suspicious of any externally introduced change which did not have their sanction. Thus an 1824 *firman*, or imperial order, prohibited the import and circulation of Bibles — probably to avoid antagonising the Muslim population. The administrative measure was

obviously not directed solely at American missionaries. However, the central authorities largely permitted local officials to circumscribe the activities of foreigners throughout the Empire and even to circumvent promises extracted from Istanbul. Hence American consular agents, settlers, archaeologists and missionaries, in Palestine and elsewhere, conducted an almost uninterrupted battle-of-wits with the Ottoman bureaucracy, which had mastered the fine arts of procrastination and confusing issues.

During the last quarter of the century, the problems of the Ottoman Empire acquired perilous immediacy. During the reign of Abdul Hamid II (1876–1909), the Empire was fighting a rearguard battle for its very survival; its military weakness had become obvious in its serious defeat by Russia in the 1877–1878 war and the Empire's loss of Cyprus and Egypt to Great Britain (1878 and 1882) and Tunisia to France (1881). Economically, its situation appeared hopeless as well. No less serious internal dangers were increasing with the growth of particularist nationalisms in the Balkans and in the Empire's Asiatic provinces. Consequently, the Ottoman authorities kept a watchful eye on movements they suspected of aiming at disintegration of the Empire. The occasional support offered by US consular agents to Jews in Palestine and to the Zionist movement aroused (unfounded) suspicions of "complicity" by the United States administration. Consequently, Ottoman diplomats in the United States were instructed to observe Zionist activities there, the press and the possible involvement of the American administration. Several quarrels ensued between the Ottoman authorities and US Consuls in Palestine, who intervened in favour of their protégés.

The Ottoman authorities were even more concerned about the Armenians in the Empire, as the latter presented demands of a more political nature and occasionally accompanied them with acts of violence. Late in the century, American missionaries interceded warmly in favour of the Armenians and even stirred up public opinion in the United States, increasing Ottoman suspicions and providing recurring cause for conflict.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

During most of the nineteenth century, American interests in the Holy Land remained cultural and religious. However, a new situation began to take shape during the final years of that century. Increasingly frequent interventions by US consular agents, nearly always on humanitarian grounds, nurtured feelings of suspicion traditionally inherent in Ottoman bureaucracy from the top to the lowest echelons. The resulting rejection of American demands, or delays in fulfilling them, incensed the American consuls, whose continued insistence aroused further suspicion of US intentions. The above-mentioned Chester Project, in the early twentieth century, further increased Ottoman misgivings about US involvement resembling that of the other Powers. Consequently, the project was shelved.

The twentieth century saw a marked change in US involvement in the Middle East — and of course in Palestine — which assumed the political, military and economic features characteristic of the strategic interests of a Great Power.

NOTES

1 Among the relevant literature, particularly useful is Moshe Davis, (ed.), *With Eyes Towards Zion,* Arno Press, New York, 1977.
2 Further examples in A.I. Katsh, *The Biblical Heritage of American Democracy,* Ktav Pub. Co., New York, 1977.
3 Details in Davis, op. cit., pp. 10–11.
4 Yehoshua Ben-Arieh, *The Rediscovery of the Holy Land in the Nineteenth Century,* The Magnes Press and Israel Exploration Society, Jerusalem, 1983.
5 For examples, Jacob M. Landau, *Abdul Hamid's Palestine,* André Deutsch and Carta, London and Jerusalem, 1979.
6 For the most famous American travellers in the Holy Land, cf. David H. Finnie, *Pioneers East: The Early American Experience in the Middle East,* Harvard U.P., Cambridge, MA, 1967, esp. ch. 7.
7 Bertha Spafford Vester, *Our Jerusalem: An American Family in the Holy City, 1881–1949,* Doubleday, Garden City, N.Y. 1950.
8 See also W.A. Williams, *America and the Middle East: Open Door Imperialism or Enlightened Leadership?* Rinehart & Company, New York, 1958, esp. pp. 57–8.
9 J.A. De Novo, *American Interests and Policies in the Middle East 1900–1939,* University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, Minn., 1968, p. 16.
10 Ibid., pp. 58–87, for details.
11 Cf. Thomas A. Bryson, *American Diplomatic Relations with the Middle East: 1784–1975: A Survey,* Scarecrow Press, Metuchen, N.J. 1977.
12 Frank F. Manuel, *The Realities of American-Palestine Relations*, Public Affairs Press, Washington, D.C., 1949, p. 8.
13 Ron Bartour, "American Consular Aid to Jews in Eretz-Israel in the Later Years of Ottoman Rule, 1856–1914", Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1985 (in Hebrew).
14 Ibid., pp. 55–7.
15 For a general survey of American philanthropic activities in the area, see Robert L. Daniel, *American Philanthropy in the Near East,* Ohio University Press, Athens, Ohio, 1970.
16 Ben-Arieh, op. cit., pp. 85–91.
17 The fruit of this visit was E. Robinson's *Biblical Researches in Palestine, Sinai, Arabia Petraea and Adjacent Regions,* published in 1841 in both English and German, which immediately bestowed on its author deserved renown.
18 A.L. Tibawi, *American Interests in Syria 1800–1901,* Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1966, pp. 230–31.
19 For details, see Joseph L. Grabill, *Protestant Diplomacy and the Near East: Missionary Influence on American Policy, 1810–1927,* University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, Minn., 1971. This work, however, pays scant attention to Palestine.
20 Mim Kemal Öke and Jacob M. Landau, "Ottoman Perspectives on American Interests in the Holy Land", in: Moshe Davis, (ed.). *With Eyes Towards Zion,* Vol. II, Praeger, N.Y., 1986, pp. 261–302. For a different interpretation, cf. Ali Ihsan, Bagis, "The Jewish Settlement in Palestine and the Ottomans' Policy", *The Third International Conference on Bilad al-Sham: Palestine, Vol. III. History of Palestine,* University of Jordan — Yarmouk University, 1984, pp. 1–9.