

# PALESTINE LAND OF PROMISE

BY

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P A L E S T I N E

L A N D O F P R O M I S E

PALESTINE, LAND OF PROMISE

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in contents, and is manufactured in strict  
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*Dedicated to*  
INEZ MARKS LOWDERMILK  
*My Comrade and Inspiration*

The author wishes to make clear that this book was written from the point of view of the Land Conservationist whose life work has been to study the relation of peoples to their lands. The opinions expressed here are personal and unofficial. They do not necessarily represent the point of view of the U. S. Soil Conservation Service of which the author is assistant chief, or of any other government department.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION TO PALESTINE

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DURING recent generations, archaeologists have made a very substantial contribution to our knowledge of human history. By learning to read the records of old countries carved in stone or written on clay tablets, parchment and papyrus, they have been able to reveal to us the state of civilization at different periods of history. By excavating old and sometimes pre-historic sites of human settlement, they have traced the technological progress of humanity from its earliest beginnings.

There are, however, other records written by farmers and shepherds, empires and civilizations into their lands. Some tillers of soil were "good stewards" of the earth loaned to them by their Creator, while others let this primary source of all wealth fall into utter neglect. By good stewardship of the land some peoples have been able to preserve their fields through thousands of years of use so that they still yield abundant crops. Other fields are sorry commentaries on man's ruthless exploitation of the good earth. By neglect, ignorance and suicidal agriculture, peoples have bequeathed to their descendants "man-made deserts" of sterile, rocky and gullied lands.

Few historians understand the indelible marks left on the land by changing civilizations. For those, however, who have

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learned to understand their simple language, these records written by man into the land are extremely revealing.

For the past twenty years it has been my profession to read the record of the land written by changing generations. These studies give us a more profound knowledge of the human past, and at the same time serve as an imperative warning for the future. In the course of my work I have had opportunity to read the impact of past civilizations on the lands of China, Korea, Japan, Europe, North Africa, South Africa, the Near East, as well as our own beloved country.

It was in 1939 that my dream of many years came true; I was enabled to study the land record of the Near East. Palestine was of special interest to me because the Bible presents the most authentic and longest written record of any nation except China. Indeed, the peoples of these sacred lands of the Near East are responsible for much that makes the religious, political and educational institutions of the Western Hemisphere full of meaning for us. Moreover, we are indebted to the prehistoric farmers of the Near East for our basic principles of agriculture and for the seed-grains of wheat and barley that are the basis of bread, "the staff of life."

My study of the land record of the Near East was made possible by the United States Department of Agriculture which in 1938 sent me as a soil conservationist to make a survey of the use of land in these old countries in the interests of land conservation in the United States. Preceding our studies in Palestine were several months of investigation of the land records of Europe. We crossed afterwards from Italy to Sicily and then by boat to North Africa. We did all our land traveling by automobile, which nowadays is the best

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means to study rural areas of special interest. From Tunisia we traveled westward along the coast to Morocco and then turned eastward and slowly worked our way back through Algeria, Tunisia and 1200 miles along the Mussolini Highway in Tripoli and Libya and through the western Egyptian desert to the old land of the Pharaohs. We visited sites of special interest for a soil conservationist and almost everywhere we saw repugnant evidences of deadly soil erosion superseding the results of skilled land use during previous centuries. Egypt, which has preserved most of its ancient irrigation canals and added new irrigation dams and canals, is a notable exception.

Our further journey to Palestine met with great difficulties. The country was at that time disturbed by a prolonged period of Arab riots. No automobile for six months had crossed the Sinai desert dividing Palestine from Egypt, and travel there was extremely dangerous. It required several days of pleading and insistence before the Egyptian authorities granted us permission to cross Sinai in our car—and strictly at our own risk.

In February, 1939, we, like the Children of Israel, left the land of Egypt before daylight, well provided with provisions for ourselves and the car. We crossed the southern part of the Land of Goshen, which Joseph had given to his brothers because it was reputed to be the best grazing land in all Egypt. Now it is a desolate, bleak and barren region.

Finally, we entered the Sinai Desert, where the Israelites and their flocks and herds wandered for forty years. Today, this land maintains only a sparse population of nomads. Thousands of goat paths, like festoons of dismal draperies, twine in and out around the sides of barren hills. We saw

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gullies, cutting headward back into denuded slopes, revealing long abuse and extensive overgrazing. Passing this tawny arid region, with its sandy wadis and occasional thorny acacia, we were glad that modern science enabled us to traverse in two days by automobile a region where the Israelites wandered for forty years.

The first impression made on us by present-day Palestine was a depressing one. The Negeb, that sparsely populated semi-desert region of southern Palestine where we entered first, showed definite traces of a long period of Arab riots, which had hardly subsided at that time. Telegraph wires were dangling, border stations were wrecked and bridges were in ruins. Suspicious-looking Arabs stood around their tents, staring wonderingly but ominously at our lone automobile as it suddenly appeared on a road over which no one had traveled for months. We were careful to travel faster than a racer camel could run, in order that news of our approach should not be passed on to terrorist groups along the road, giving them time to start an attack on us.

Our reception by officials of the Mandate Government was very cordial. Every facility was placed at our disposal for studies in Palestine and Trans-Jordan. In districts menaced by Arab terrorism the authorities supplied an armored car to escort us, and Tommies to protect us while I took pictures and soil samples or made studies on foot. Also an airplane was put at our disposal with Captain P. L. O. Guy in command, for an additional survey of Palestine from the air.

In this small sacred land, we traveled more than 2300 miles by automobile and an additional 1000 miles in Trans-Jordan, besides making airplane surveys. During more than three months of intensive field studies, we were assisted by leading

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officials of the Departments of Agriculture, Horticulture and Forestry, by soil scientists from the Hebrew University and by archaeologists, who accompanied us to all places of special interest in Palestine and Trans-Jordan.

During our stay in Palestine, the elements also co-operated in our work. A fine demonstration of the "latter rains" let us see how erosion had been carrying away the soils as a result of the neglect and breakdown of terraced agriculture. We saw drainage channels running full of brown silt-laden gully washers, cutting their banks and joining with water from other drainages to make a storm flood that roared down the main valleys. Here before our eyes the remarkable red-earth soil of Palestine was being ripped from the slopes and swept down into the coastal plain and carried out to sea, where it turned the blue of the Mediterranean to a dirty brown as far as the eye could see. We could well understand how during many centuries this type of erosion has wasted the neglected lands. It is estimated that over three feet of soil has been swept from the uplands of Palestine since the breakdown of terrace agriculture.

Along with the records of decay in the Holy Land we found a thoroughgoing effort to restore the ancient fertility of the long-neglected soil. This effort is the most remarkable we have seen while studying land use in twenty-four countries. It is being made by Jewish settlers who fled to Palestine from the hatreds and persecutions of Europe. We were astonished to find about three hundred colonies defying great hardships and applying the principles of co-operation and soil conservation to the old Land of Israel. Amazed by this phenomenon we gave much time and attention to study of the methods and achievements of these colonies and the diffi-

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culties they had to overcome. Here in one corner of the vast Near East, thoroughgoing work is in progress to rebuild the fertility of land instead of condemning it by neglect to further destruction and decay.

The far-reaching works of reclamation now being conducted in Palestine not only provide an example to other countries in their need to restore wasted lands but are vitally important for hundreds of thousands for whom they mean the only chance for security and human existence. The persecution and mass slaughter of Jews in Nazi-dominated Europe have vastly increased the dynamic power of the building activities in Palestine. Since 1933, Hitler's anti-Semitic drives have deprived millions of Jews of their livelihood and driven them from their homes and the lands of their birth. Many of them dared all risks to reach the one "Land of Promise" where they could find a haven of refuge. Here, their trained minds and physical energies have been devoted to the establishment of a National Home for themselves and their descendants. The Jews, since 1917, have spent over half a billion dollars on redeeming the land of this small country and rehabilitating hundreds of thousands of refugees who are only part of the millions needing a haven. The Jewish population of Palestine has grown from about 50,000 in 1918 to over 550,000 in 1943, representing over a third of the total population of about 1,600,000 of whom 900,000 are Moslem Arabs and 125,000 are Christians.

The movement for establishing a Jewish homeland in Palestine is one of the most remarkable records of a people's struggle for national survival and self-expression. It began about four thousand years ago in Ur of the Chaldees, when Abraham, prompted by divine inspiration left the plains of

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Mesopotamia to establish a new people on the Land of Canaan. It continued after several centuries, when the descendants of Abraham went to Egypt for food during a famine and were held there in bondage. Oppression by the Pharaohs fired them to throw off this slavery and again they directed their steps across the wilderness to their homeland. This urge came to life yet again when, after centuries of settlement in Palestine, the Jewish people were driven into exile by the conquests of Assyria and Babylon. On the rivers of Babylon the exiled Jews continued to dream of returning to their devastated National Home, and their leaders, Ezra and Nehemiah, finally went back into Palestine to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

After centuries of prosperity, the Jewish people again were caught in the conquests of an aggressor—this time it was Rome—and after heroic resistance, they were driven from their Sacred Land. Since then Jewish craving for Palestine has been the main inspiration of this distressed people. This dream of the restoration of Zion has never died out in the two thousand years of the Diaspora. The religious faith of the Jews has been permeated by a fervent belief in a prophetic resurrection of the Jewish nation in the land of their forefathers. They have been a minority in other lands and have borne the brunt of hatreds and persecutions to which minorities are so often subject. When the industrial revolution came to eastern and central Europe and made life intolerable for small Jewish tradesmen, craftsmen and professional men, a new inspired leader, Dr. Theodor Herzl, rekindled with prophetic vision the old dream of a homeland in Palestine. Hardships and anti-Semitism in Europe drove these persecuted people in ever-growing numbers to seek a better way

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of life in Palestine. During the First World War the justice of their historic aspiration was recognized by the British Balfour Declaration of November 2, 1917, reading:

His Majesty's Government view with favor the establishment in Palestine of a National Home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavors 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 the Jews in any other country.

Seconded in 1922 by a unanimous resolution of the United States Sixty-Seventh Congress and adhered to by the League of Nations, the Balfour Declaration became the charter rallying a world-wide Jewish crusade for the redemption of Palestine as a National Homeland. A great surge of colonization followed. But the necessity for a Jewish resettlement of Palestine took on its full urgency only with the rise of Nazism.

During my stay in Palestine in 1939, I witnessed a tragic by-product of the German advance into Czechoslovakia. In Palestine and Syria we were told of old cargo boats, filled with refugees from Nazi-dominated Central Europe, whose captains tried desperately to disembark this living cargo on the shores of Palestine. We saw some of these old and often unseaworthy boats, whose miserable passengers were not permitted to land anywhere because of the lack of formal visas. We saw those wretched ships floating about on a steaming sea in unbearable summer heat, with refugees packed in holds under intolerably inhuman conditions. The laws governing the transportation of animals for slaughter in the United States do not permit conditions like those which



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some of the intelligentsia of central Europe had to undergo in these old boats on the Mediterranean. The revolting slave ships of a century ago were better; for slaves had a sale value and their ships were sped to their destination without delay. But Jewish refugees were kept floating about upon a torrid sea, just out of sight of land, with a desperate hope that the captain, though risking confiscation of his ship, would attempt to discharge them illegally on the shores of Palestine. Unbelievable tragedies have taken place on the way to Palestine. I was told of ships that had set out laden with refugees, and after some months turned up empty again, with no trace of their human cargo. None of them have been heard from since by their relatives.

During our stay in Beirut an old cargo boat, loaded with 655 refugees from Czechoslovakia, was unloaded at the quarantine station for a few days. The ship was so overrun with rats that the passengers had to be removed to exterminate these vermin. After obtaining permission to interview the refugees, we found that they had been floating about for eleven weeks, packed into little wooden shelves built around the four cargo holds. The congestion, the ghastly unsanitary conditions and sufferings that these people had undergone aroused our highest admiration for their courage and fortitude. Their food was gone, and all of them had contracted scurvy from malnutrition. We were astonished to find that these former citizens of Czechoslovakia represented a very high level of European culture. Most of them spoke several languages, and many of them were able to tell us their story in English. Of the 655 refugees, forty-two were lawyers, forty were engineers, twenty-six were physicians and surgeons, in addition to women doctors, professional writers, gifted