

# Standing With Israel

When I first took my post as an American reporter for a news magazine in Jerusalem many years ago, I was advised to talk with officials in neighboring Arab states before I settled down in Israel. It was good counsel. I learned a lot from that trip, and I think it helped round out my reporting.

But on the way back to Israel, I had a driver take me from Amman, the capital of Jordan, to Mount Nebo amid the hills of Ammon. It was from here, by tradition, that Moses gazed down on the promised land at the end of the long exodus from Egypt. I wanted to capture in my imagination what it was the ancient Hebrews sensed they had come to.

The view, even in the late 20th century, was breathtaking. Stretching to the left in the haze of mid-summer was the Dead Sea. To the right lay the Jordan River, snaking to the salt sea from the Sea of Galilee to the north.

The ancient Hebrews originally entered Canaan around the 14th century B.C. It took them a long time to conquer the land, and they never entirely drove out the original inhabitants. But from the time of King David onward—from about 1000 B.C.—the stamp of the Jewish national character and the unique relationship of the Jews to their one true God seem to have become permanently associated with the landscape of Israel.

Hundreds of years and dozens of conquests later, the Jews started on their prolonged wandering among the nations after the Romans expelled them from Jerusalem in A.D. 135. Though a

handful of Jews always managed to remain in the land, the Jewish imprint was eclipsed by that of the Muslim Arabs, who conquered Palestine in A.D. 636. The Arabs lived there permanently afterward, even after the Turks conquered them in 1517.

Yet in their exile, the Jews never forgot their longing to return to their ancient homeland. For centuries they would repeat the words of the Passover seder: "Next year in Jerusalem."

Strange as it may seem, many Christians from the Reformation onward shared that longing, believing that if it were fulfilled it would be a harbinger of other Messianic prophecies from the Bible. When Zionism—the Jewish movement to return to Palestine—took form in the late 19th century in Europe, Christians again encouraged the Jewish aspiration.

Theodore Herzl, the founder of modern Zionism, was greatly helped by a devout Anglican cleric interested in prophecy, the Rev. William Hechler. Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, the Russian Jew who resurrected the Hebrew language, was profoundly encouraged at key moments by an earnest Polish Roman Catholic.

The British general Sir Edmund Allenby, a devout Christian who ousted the Turks from Jerusalem in 1917, was so humbled by where he was that he refused to ride a horse into Jerusalem. Instead he marched on foot. In 1948, President Harry Truman overruled State Department officials and recognized the infant state of Israel.

Was God behind modern Zionism—and is He still—or was the movement just a romantic aspiration based on national

historical nostalgia?

As Israel and Jews around the world enter another perilous time in their history, Christians will again be challenged to address this question. In Gaza, Islamic clerics have been calling on the Muslim faithful in televised sermons to murder Jews on sight, along with “those Americans who like them”—presumably, American Christians.

It is thus both an encouragement and a blessing to recall Genesis 12:3, “‘I will bless those who bless you [the Jews] and whoever curses you I will curse,’” or Psalm 122:6-7: “Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: ‘May those who love you be secure. May there be peace within your walls and security within your citadels’” (NIV).

We Christians in past eras often mistreated Jews terribly, or stood aside when others did. But now we may have a new opportunity to make up for this. I tremble for our country if our nation’s leaders ever forget the words of Genesis 12:3.