

PALESTINE VS. ISRAEL AS THE NAME OF THE HOLY LAND

by Thomas S. McCall, Th.D.

During the last few centuries, the world, Christians included, has fallen into a bad habit. We have bought into some early Roman propaganda. We have used the name Palestine, which Roman Emperor Hadrian placed on the country of Israel in 135A.D., for so long that it has become common usage. This would be as incorrect as calling the Russia of today the "Soviet Union" or referring to Berlin as "East Germany." The thoughts below by our ministry's senior theologian, Dr Thomas S. McCall, completely explore the subject.

Current Propaganda's Use of Palestine. There is a propaganda war going on now with regard to the term "Palestine." At one time it might have been argued that Palestine was an innocuous designation of the Middle Eastern area, that is generally thought of as the Holy Land. During the last few decades, however, the term Palestine has been adopted by Arabs living in Israel in the area west of the Jordan River. It is specifically employed to avoid the use of the name Israel, and must be considered an anti-Israel term. In all Arab maps published in Jordan, Egypt, etc., the area west of the Jordan River is called Palestine, without any reference to Israel. Palestine is the term now used by those who want to deny the legitimate existence of Israel as a genuine nation among the family of nations.

The term now adopted by the political entity within Israel that is gradually obtaining more and more pockets of territory through the "peace process," is "the PA (Palestinian Authority). Although it must deal daily with Israeli officials, the PA hates to use the term Israel in any of its communications.

Palestine, therefore, must now be considered a political propaganda term with massive anti-Israel implications. The world press uses the term to question the legitimacy of modern Israel. Christians also have used the term Palestine for centuries in referring to the Holy Land. In earlier times this might have been excused (although biblically questionable) because of its common usage. In light of the current propaganda war against Israel, however, Christians must now re-evaluate the term Palestine and consider whether it is biblically, theologically or prophetically accurate.

Biblical Use of Palestine. The term Palestine is rarely used in the Old Testament, and when it is, it refers specifically to the southwestern coastal area of Israel occupied by the Philistines. It is a translation of the Hebrew word "Pilisheth." The term is never used to refer to the whole land occupied by Israel. Before Israel occupied the land, it would be generally accurate to say that the southwestern coastal area was called Philistia (the Way of the Philistines, or Palestine), while the central highlands were called Canaan. Both the Canaanites and the Philistines had disappeared as distinct peoples at least by the time of the Babylonian Captivity of Judea (586 B.C.), and they no longer exist.

In the New Testament, the term Palestine is never used. The term Israel is primarily used to refer to the people of Israel, rather than the Land. However, in at least two passages, Israel is used to refer to the Land:

Saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and go into the land of Israel: for they are dead who sought the young child's 41e. And he arose, and took the young child and his mother, and came into the land of Israel (Matt. 2.20-21).

But when they persecute you in this city, flee ye into another: for verily I say to you, Ye shall not have gone over the cities of Israel till the Son of man shall have come (Matt. 10.23,).

The first passage is when Joseph, Mary and Jesus returned from Egypt to Israel, and the second has reference to the proclamation of the Gospel throughout the Land of Israel. Jesus, Matthew and the angel speaking to Joseph use the term Israel with reference to the Land, even though the term was not then recognized by the Roman authorities.

It is clear, then, that the Bible never uses the term Palestine to refer to the Holy Land as a whole, and that Bible maps that refer to Palestine in the Old or New Testament are, at best, inaccurate, and, at worst, are a conscious denial of the biblical name of Israel.

History of the Term Palestine. Where did the term Palestine originate from? How did the world and the church get into the habit of calling the land of Israel "Palestine"? One of the guides we use in our tours to Israel is Zvi Rivai, an Israeli Messianic believer, who has done considerable research on this subject. Zvi informs us that before 135 A.D., the Romans used the terms Judea and Galilee to refer to the Land of Israel. When Titus destroyed Jerusalem in 70 A.D., the Roman government struck a coin with the phrase "Judea Capta," meaning Judea has been captured. The term Palestine was never used in the early Roman designations.

It was not until the Romans crushed the second Jewish revolt against Rome in 135 A.D. under Bar Kochba that Emperor Hadrian applied the term Palestine to the Land of Israel. Hadrian, like many dictators since his times realized the propaganda power of terms and symbols. He replaced the shrines of the Jewish Temple and the Sepulchre of Christ in Jerusalem with temples to pagan deities. He changed the name of Jerusalem to Aelia Capitalina, and changed the name of Israel and Judea to Palestine. Hadrian's selection of Palestine was purposeful, not accidental. He took the name of the ancient enemies of Israel, the Philistines, Latinized it to Palestine, and applied it to the Land of Israel. He hoped to erase the name Israel from all memory. Thus, the term Palestine as applied to the Land of Israel was invented by the inveterate enemy of the Bible and the Jewish people, Emperor Hadrian.

It is interesting to note that the original Philistines were not Middle Eastern at all. They were European peoples from the Adriatic sea next to Greece. It may have pleased Hadrian to utilize this Hellenistic term for the Jewish land. In any case, the original "Palestinians" had nothing to do, whatever, with any Arabs.

Christian Adoption of the Term Palestine. One of the first Christian uses of the term Palestine is found in the works of the Church historian Eusebius, who lived in Caesarea. He

wrote around 300 A.D., as the Roman persecution of Christians was ending and the Emperor Constantine began to accept Christianity as legal. Eusebius did not accept Hadrian's designation of Jerusalem as Aelia Capitalina, but he did use Hadrian's term Palestine. Eusebius considered himself to be one of the bishops of Palestine. Thus, the anti-Israel, anti-Christian name of Palestine was assimilated into the Church's vocabulary as the Byzantine Empire was being established.

The Church has, since that time, broadly used the term Palestine in literature and in maps to refer to the Land of Israel. It should be noted, however, that the Crusaders called their land the Kingdom of Jerusalem. When the British received the mandate after World War I, though, they called the land on both sides of the Jordan River, Palestine. This became the accepted geopolitical term for several decades, and those who lived in the land were called Palestinians, whether they were Jews, Arabs or Europeans.

Even evangelical Christians who believe in the future of Israel have used the term Palestine. The New Scofield Reference Edition of the Bible has maps in the back entitled "Palestine under the Herods." There never was a Palestine under the Herods. This is a serious misidentification. It would be something like looking at a modern map of Texas and having it titled "Mexico in the Twentieth Century"

The MacArthur Study Bible published just last year contains a map called "Palestine in Christ's Time" There are numerous references in the notes to something called first-century Palestine.

It appears that Bible-believing Christians have either knowingly or unwittingly followed the world, pagans and haters of Israel in calling Israel by the anti-Israel term Palestine. It is found throughout Bible maps, Bible commentaries and textbooks.

Proper Designation of the Land. The use of the term Palestine was biblically inaccurate and wrong throughout the Church age. However, it is more than just wrong, it is devastating in our time, when the term Palestine is the cornerstone of the propaganda war against Israel and the Jewish people. Do we want to use terms invented by those who hate Christ, the Bible and Israel? Do we want to utilize terms used by the enemies of Israel who desire to accomplish nothing less than the destruction of the Jewish people? I think not.

Christians should use the terminology of the Bible wherever possible. Why not go back to the terms used in the New Testament? The Gospel writers used the term Israel to refer to the Land. Why should we use any other term when referring to the Land, especially now that the Jews are back in the Land and have re-established the nation of Israel among the family of nations?

As we draw closer to the Second Coming of Christ, we should understand that Satan's fury against the Church and Israel will grow exponentially. Satan hates the Gospel of the crucified and risen Messiah, and he hates the reality of the restoration of Israel as the nation that will ultimately receive Jesus as the Messiah at His return, and the nation that will be Christ's earthly headquarters. The only term we should use for the Land is Israel, or its subdivisions of

Judea, Samaria, and Galilee. We should make every effort to remove the term Palestine from our Bible maps and textbooks, and use only biblical terms with reference to the Holy Land of Israel.