
BACKGROUND BOOKS

ISRAEL

"Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will show thee."

Abraham, an elderly and wealthy resident of Ur (it is thought) in Sumer, did as the Lord bade him, arriving after a time in the Land of Canaan. His descendants fled to Egypt, driven by famine, but after many centuries they returned, taking the Promised Land by force.

The saga of the Israelites from Abraham's era (c. 2000 B.C.) through the Exodus and Babylonian captivity to the successful revolt of the Maccabees against the Greek Seleucid rulers of Palestine in 168 B.C. is recounted in **The Pentateuch and Haftorahs** (Soncino, 1950; rev. ed., 1960), more commonly known as the Old Testament. To the surprise of some, much modern research vouches for the essential "historicity" of the Bible; contemporary Israelis have invested heavily in archeological research—to demonstrate, as diplomat Abba Eban once put it, that Israel "is not a new synthetic nation writing its history on a clean slate."

Yet the slate has often been partially erased. Pompey captured Judea in 63 B.C., ending a century of de facto Jewish independence. The Israelites chafed under Roman rule. The massive revolt of 66–70 A.D. was the focus of Flavius Josephus's **Wars of the Jews** (Peter Smith, 1959, cloth; Penguin, 1959, paper). Josephus, a Romanized Jew, probably intended his book to discourage further outbreaks of the kind that had led to the loss of one million Jewish lives.

But the Jews rose up again in 118 A.D.—and then once more in 132 A.D.,

after Emperor Hadrian announced plans to rebuild Jerusalem as a paganized Roman city. The Romans finally overcame the rebels led by Simeon Bar Kokhba after a tough, three-year war. Most of the remaining Jews in Palestine were massacred, enslaved, or expelled.

Books describing the return of the Jews to Palestine are, as the Bible says of Abraham's descendants, "numberless as the stars in the sky." They include broad historical surveys, such as Martin Gilbert's **Exile and Return** (2 vols., Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1978, out of print); authoritative and balanced treatments of the Mandate, notably J. C. Hurewitz's **The Struggle for Palestine** (Greenwood, 1968, cloth; Schocken, 1976, paper) and Christopher Sykes's lively **Crossroads to Israel** (Ind. Univ., 1973, paper); reminiscences, including **Trial and Error** (Greenwood, 1972), the autobiography of Israel's first President, Chaim Weizmann; collections of speeches and essays, such as David Ben-Gurion's **Rebirth and Destiny of Israel** (Philosophical Library, 1954); and experiments in "historical journalism" like Amos Elon's engaging **The Israelis: Founders and Sons** (Holt, 1971, cloth; Bantam, 1972, paper, out of print).

Palestine proved disappointing. As they disembarked at Yafo, Elon writes, "many arrivals recorded their shock at the Oriental confusion, the noise and the squalor . . . its filthy bazaars, its thoroughly corrupt Turkish administration, its swarms of sore-eyed children, money-changers, peddlars, beggars, flies."

One of the better short introduc-

tions to the birth of Zionism, the mass migration (*aliyah*) of Jews to Palestine, and the social organization of the struggling Jewish community there prior to 1948 is **The Modern History of Israel** (Praeger, 1975, out of print) by Noah Lucas.

Among enlightened European Jews of the 19th century, the notion of socialism as a means of Jewish emancipation predated (and long precluded) serious talk of return to the ancient homeland. A socialist impulse persisted as Zionism gained momentum after the 1880s.

But the socialist-Zionist vision remained only a vision until the arrival in Palestine, during the second *aliyah* (1904–14), of a small group of hard-headed pioneers, who were not café ideologues but pragmatic rebels and ardent nationalists. They were led by such men as David Ben-Gurion (who in 1920, with Berl Katznelson, would found the Histadrut, Israel's labor federation) and the charismatic Russian émigré A. D. Gordon.

Faced, Lucas writes, with an already entrenched class of Jewish landowners from the 1882 migration, Gordon took a group of followers north on foot to the Galilee. There the Gordonites established a network of *ktzuva*, small agricultural units dedicated to self-sufficiency and cooperative trading. These were the forerunners of the *kibbutzim*.

For all their common sense, Lucas concludes, the early settlers of Palestine suffered from some blind spots—especially where the indigenous population was concerned. “The vital illusion beclouding Zionist contemplation of the Arabs,” he writes, “was that well-timed compromises or well-worded gestures of moderation would, by overcoming piecemeal the particular instances of Arab opposition, suffice

to resolve the problems of the relations between the two peoples.”

Combining sharp wit and poetic flair with an acute understanding of international affairs, Arthur Koestler, in **Promise and Fulfillment: Palestine 1917–1949** (New York: Macmillan, 1949, out of print), places much of the blame for the enduring conflict in the Middle East on Great Britain. In essence, he writes, Britain made promises in the Balfour Declaration to both Jews and Arabs that it simply could not keep—on the one hand, creation of a “national home” for the Jewish people; on the other, protection of the “civil and religious rights of non-Jewish communities in Palestine.”

Arab terrorists raided Jewish settlements right under British noses; the Jewish underground, the Haganah and the Irgun, fought back. When the British, preoccupied by withdrawal from India, vacated Palestine in 1948, they made no provision for legal administration or peacekeeping forces in the territory.

“The whole plan and manner of this unprecedented abandonment of a country,” Koestler argues, “after a long period of international trusteeship, with no authorized security forces in any area, could produce no other foreseeable result than to set that country, and *ipso facto* the whole Middle East, ‘afame.’”

So it did—and has. For more than a year following proclamation of the state in 1948, the Israelis, their manpower stretched to the limit, held off invading armies from Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Libya, spearheaded by Jordan's elite Arab Legion. After the UN cease-fire of June 11, 1949, the Israelis, having lost 4,000 soldiers and 2,000 civilians, vowed never again to be caught unprepared.

"Of the many ironies of Israeli life," write Edward Luttwak and Dan Horowitz, in **The Israeli Army** (Harper, 1975, out of print), "none is more significant than the sharp contrast between the near-pacifism of the founding fathers and the military preoccupation of modern Israel." During the 1973 Yom Kippur War, they note, Israel sent into battle the third largest tank force and the sixth largest air force in the Western world. A good supplement to Luttwak and Horowitz is Ze'ev Schiff's profusely illustrated **A History of the Israeli Army** (trans. and ed. by Raphael Rothstein, Straight Arrow Books, 1974).

One of the basic characteristics of Israeli society today is its class stratification—the subject of Sammy Smooha's **Israel: Pluralism and Conflict** (Univ. of Calif., 1978).

There exist, he contends, four levels: "The disenfranchised Palestinian Arabs rank at the bottom, the subordinate Arab minority occupy the next lower layer, the disadvantaged Oriental majority take an intermediate position, and . . . the superior Ashkenazi minority outdistance all the non-European groups." Lawrence Meyer, though echoing Smooha's findings, provides a far more comprehensive picture of modern Israeli society in his vivid survey **Israel Now: Portrait of a Troubled Land** (Delacorte, 1982).

Despite domestic tensions between Jews and Jews, and between Jews and Arabs, the Israeli government has had somewhat better luck moderating differences at home than it has in its dealings abroad. While the United States remains Israel's only steadfast (if not always uncritical) friend, Nadav Safran explains in

Israel: The Embattled Ally (Harvard, 1978, cloth & paper), some Israelis find the intimacy of the relationship disquieting. There is, he observes, "a sense of the American 'presence' in every corner of Israeli life. There is hardly an important educational, cultural, scientific, or philanthropic institution today which is not supported in some significant way by American Jewish (as well as governmental) aid." Reminders are everywhere. On the doors of Israeli ambulances, one may find such inscriptions as "Donated by Feigenblat & Blumenkohl, New York."

A more complex association is that of the Israelis and the Egyptians. Howard M. Sachar recounts the parallel emergence of both **Egypt and Israel** (Marek, 1982) from colonialism and traces their "mutual search for political identity"—culminating with the Camp David agreements in 1978. Sachar is the author of several outstanding works on the Jewish state, notably **A History of Israel** (Knopf, 1976, paper only) and **Aliyah: The Peoples of Israel** (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1961); his writing is lucid and often anecdotal.

Sachar regards Israel's rapprochement with Egypt as grounds for guarded optimism. But there are still many Jews and Arabs whose philosophy was best expressed by a character in **The Bridal Canopy** (trans. by I. M. Lask, Doubleday, 1st ed., 1937; Schocken, 1967, paper), a novel by Israeli Nobel laureate S. Y. Agnon: "If there's a chance that when I begin treating [a stranger] in friendly fashion I'll have to finish by kicking him, it's better to kick him to begin with and then he won't trouble me any more at all."