

Chapter 4

The Desolation of the Land of Israel

Before the children of Israel entered the Promised Land, God spoke a series of stern warnings to them through Moses, their leader and prophet. The warnings are recorded in Deuteronomy 28 and 29.

These chapters constitute God’s Land Covenant with the Jewish people. In this covenant, God made it clear that although He had given the Jewish people an everlasting title to the land, their enjoyment of it would depend on their obedience to the laws He had given them in the Mosaic Covenant.

The Hope of Blessings

The Land Covenant begins with promises of blessings if they are obedient (Deuteronomy 28:1-2):

- 1) “Now it shall be, if you diligently obey the LORD your God, being careful to do all His commandments which I command you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth.
- 2) “All these blessings will come upon you and overtake you if you obey the LORD your God . . .”

Moses then proceeded to enumerate the blessings in detail. They included such things as agricultural abundance, defeat of enemies, financial prosperity and abundant rain (Deuteronomy 28:3-13).

The Warning of Curses

But then, Moses started issuing warnings about curses that would come upon them if they were disobedient to the Lord (Deuteronomy 28:15ff). The variety of these curses was breathtaking — cities in chaos, youth in rebellion, an epidemic of divorce, confusing governmental policies, defeats by their enemies, rampant disease, drought leading to crop failures, foreign domination and even exile to a foreign land.

Moses concluded the list with a detailed explanation of what would be the ultimate judgment of God should they become entrenched in rebellion and refuse to repent (Deuteronomy 28:64-67):

- 64) “Moreover, the LORD will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other end of the earth; and there you shall serve other gods, wood and stone, which you or your fathers have not known.
- 65) “Among those nations you shall find no rest, and there will be no resting place for the sole of your foot; but there the LORD will give you a trembling heart, failing of eyes, and despair of soul.
- 66) “So your life shall hang in doubt before you; and you will be in dread night and day, and shall have no assurance of your life.

67) “In the morning you shall say, ‘Would that it were evening!’ And at evening you shall say, ‘Would that it were morning!’ because of the dread of your heart which you dread, and for the sight of your eyes which you will see.”

In summary, the ultimate punishment the Jewish people would receive for willful and unrepentant rebellion against God’s Word would be ejection from their land, their scattering world-wide, and their persecution wherever they went.

The Curse on the Land

Nor would that be all. Moses further stated that God would put a curse on their land, and as a result of that curse, the land would become filled with diseases and plagues (Deuteronomy 29:22). The land itself would become “a burning waste, unsown and unproductive, and no grass [growing] in it . . .” (Deuteronomy 29:23).

The curse would be so terrible that when foreigners came to visit the land, they would cry out, “Why has the LORD done this to the land? Why this great outburst of anger?” (Deuteronomy 29:24).

And the answer will be: “Because they forsook the covenant of the LORD, the God of their fathers . . . [and] they went and served other gods and worshiped them . . . Therefore, the anger of the LORD burned against that land, to bring upon it every curse which is written in this book; and the LORD uprooted them from their land in anger and in fury and in great wrath . . .” (Deuteronomy 29:25-28).

The Promise of Hope

Fortunately for the Jewish people, Moses did not leave it there. He continued on to speak some words of hope. He assured them that if they were ever scattered all over the world, a day would come when God in His compassion would “restore them from captivity” by regathering them to their homeland (Deuteronomy 30:3). “If your outcasts are at the ends of the earth, from there the LORD your God will gather you, and from there He will bring you back” (Deuteronomy 30:4).

The prophet Ezekiel picked it up from there, prophesying what would happen to the land when the Jewish people were regathered to it (Ezekiel 36:34-35):

34) The desolate land will be cultivated instead of being a desolation in the sight of everyone who passes by.

35) They will say, “This desolate land has become like the garden of Eden; and the waste, desolate and ruined cities are fortified and inhabited.”

Prophetic Fulfillment

What an incredible panorama of future events that have been fulfilled precisely in detail!

After the Jewish people occupied their Promised Land under the leadership of Joshua, they immediately began to stray from God’s Word. They violated God’s command not to intermarry with the pagan peoples of the land. As they did so, they began to worship the false gods of these peoples.

God responded by sending prophets to call them to repentance. When they refused to repent, God began to afflict them with the very curses that Moses had outlined in his warnings. Finally, just as Moses had prophesied, they were taken into exile, first the northern kingdom of Israel (722 BC) and then the southern kingdom of Judah (586 BC).

After God allowed the Jews of the southern kingdom to return from their Babylonian captivity, they persisted in their rebellion, consummating with the rejection of the Messiah whom God had

sent to them.

It was at that point that God allowed the Romans to destroy Jerusalem in 70 AD, including the Jewish Temple. This resulted in their ejection from the land and their worldwide scattering, a process that was accelerated after the Second Jewish Revolt in 132-136 AD.

Over the next 1800 years the Jews were literally scattered to the four corners of the earth, in fulfillment of Moses' prophecy. And in further fulfillment of prophecy, they were persecuted wherever they went, and their homeland became utterly desolate.

The Nature of the Promised Land

Keep in mind that their homeland was one of great abundance when the Jewish people entered it some 1400 years before the time of Jesus. Here's how it was described by Moses (Deuteronomy 8:7-9):

7) “. . . the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing forth in valleys and hills;

8) a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive oil and honey;

9) a land where you will eat food without scarcity, in which you will not lack anything; a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills you can dig copper.”

Moses further characterized the land as being very different from the arid land of Egypt because it “drinks from the rain of heaven” (Deuteronomy 11:10-11). Moses also described it as “a land for which the LORD your God cares; the eyes of the LORD your God are always on it, from the beginning even to the end of the year” (Deuteronomy 11:12).

Ezekiel affirmed this evaluation of the land many years later when he wrote that God swore to the Jewish people that He would bring them out of the land of Egypt into a land “flowing with milk and honey, which is the glory of all lands” (Ezekiel 20:6-7,15).

The Desolation of the Land

Yet, just as prophesied, this glorious land became “a haunt of jackals” and “a heap of ruins” (Jeremiah 9:11).

Rainfall diminished, trees were cut down, top soil eroded and excessive sedimentation in the valleys resulted in water-logging and the creation of swamps. With swamps came an outbreak of malaria which weakened the population and led to the abandonment of villages and formerly cultivated land.¹

The land became repugnant, and during the 1800 years the Jews were exiled from it, no one really desired it. It became a deserted wasteland, and Jerusalem became an incubator of disease. By the beginning of the 19th Century, it was a place people avoided, except for the most fanatical Christian pilgrims — like the Russians who would walk all the way to the Holy Land and die there.

In my library I have a number of books written in the 19th Century by Western explorers who wrote graphic descriptions of the land. Following are some examples.

1855

In 1855 an American medical doctor named Jonathan Miesse traveled to the Holy Land and published his recollections in 1859 in a book titled *A Journey to Egypt and Palestine*.² (Israel had been renamed Palestine by the Romans and was still called by that name in the 19th Century). Dr. Miesse wrote:³

. . . at present, nearly three thousand years after David, the country is a prey to the wild beasts, and to the wilder Bedouins; and of the inhabitants, each plants just enough to satisfy his greatest bodily wants, all surplus the Bedouin will take, and what he leaves behind, the ruling Turk will confiscate.

His reference to the Turks pointed to another curse on the land. The Ottoman Empire of the Turks had taken control of the land in 1516, and they quickly established a reputation for administrative incompetence and corruption.

1867

Twelve years later, Mark Twain made a trip to Palestine. He was a journalist at the time for a San Francisco newspaper. He published his impressions in 1869 in a book titled *The Innocents Abroad*.⁴ It was the book that made Twain famous. He described Palestine as a “blistering, naked, treeless land.”⁵

Regarding the Sea of Galilee area, in particular, Twain wrote, “There is not a solitary village . . . There are two or three small clusters of Bedouin tents, but not a single permanent habitation. One may ride ten miles, hereabouts, and not see ten human beings.” Then, referring to Bible prophecy, he wrote, “To this region, the prophecies apply: ‘I will bring the land into desolation; and your enemies which dwell therein shall be astonished at it’” (Leviticus 26:32).⁶

A reference to fulfilled prophecy in this passage is remarkable since Mark Twain was not a believer. Even more so when you consider that he added this statement: “No man can stand here [in this deserted area] and say the prophecy has not been fulfilled.”⁷

Concerning the Valley of Jezreel (or the Valley of Armageddon, as Christians call it), Twain observed, “A desolation is here that not even imagination can grace with the pomp of life and action.”⁸ He described the central highlands of Samaria by stating, “There was hardly a tree or a shrub anywhere. Even the olive and the cactus, those fast friends of a worthless soil, had almost deserted the country.”⁹ Continuing with his description of Samaria, he wrote: “No landscape exists that is more tiresome to the eye than that which bounds the approaches to Jerusalem.”¹⁰

Twain’s summary description of the land was a dismal one: “. . . it truly is monotonous and uninviting . . . It is a hopeless, dreary, heart-broken land.”¹¹

Twain concluded his observations about Palestine in the mid-19th Century with these poignant words: “Palestine sits in sackcloth and ashes . . . and why should it be otherwise? Can the curse of the Deity beautify a land?”¹²

1884

Another American tourist, Henry M. Field, published a book about his trip to Palestine in 1884. He wrote about the treeless, desolate landscape as follows:¹³

The country seemed deserted of human habitations . . . Its appearance was made still more desolate by being without trees. While riding among the hills, I did not see a single tree. Whether this be owing to the government tax on trees, or the wastefulness of the people in cutting for fuel every young tree almost as soon as it shows its head above the ground, I know not; I only state the fact, that the landscape was absolutely treeless.

1912

As the 20th Century began and the Jews started to return to their homeland, the condition of the land had not improved. In 1912 a British traveler by the name of Sir Frederick Treves, published a

book appropriately titled, “*The Land That Is Desolate*.”¹⁴

Describing the approach to Jerusalem, Treves wrote:¹⁵

It is practically treeless. Such hedges as exist are mostly of prickly cactus . . . The villages passed are secretive-looking clumps of flat-topped huts made, it would seem, of a chocolate-coloured mud and decorated with litter and refuse.

Speaking of the area surrounding Jerusalem, Treves observed that “the hills are bare save for some hectic grass and starveling scrub.”¹⁶ As for Jerusalem, he wrote:¹⁷

. . . the city itself is as the shadow of a rock in a weary land. With the exception of a few pallid olive trees, a patch here and there of indefinite green, and a melancholy cypress, the environs of Jerusalem are a dusty, ungenial limestone waste.

Treves described Bethlehem as “a drab city of drab houses on a drab ridge, as monotonous in colour and as cheerless looking as a pile of dry bones.”¹⁸ Likewise, he wrote about the Nazareth area as being “a sorry country, for the land is bare, harsh, and treeless . . . Here is assuredly to be seen the poverty of the earth.”¹⁹ Regarding the Galilee area, he described it as “abandoned.”²⁰ Concerning the “wholly dirty town of Tiberias,” he stated that it was “a wretched and stinking place” with “sturdy vermin.”²¹

1924

Even as late as the mid-1920s, Palestine was still being described as “a barren, rocky and forbidding land” by Oliver C. Dalby in his booklet, *Rambles in Scriptural Lands*.²² He characterized Jerusalem as a place where the streets were “narrow and dirty,” and where “the buildings are austere and unattractive.”²³

A Strange Miracle

In a book published in 2007, an American Orthodox Jewish Rabbi named Menachem Kohen, asserted that the greatest miracle performed by God during the past 1800 years was one that occurred daily in the land of Palestine — namely, little or no rain.²⁴ He refers to it as a “reoccurring miracle.”²⁵ And he asserts that this miracle of drought was for the purpose of fulfilling prophecies in Deuteronomy 28 which read: “The LORD will make the rain of your land powder and dust . . .” (Deuteronomy 28:24). He also points to other prophecies:

You shall bring out much seed to the field but you will gather in little, for the locust will consume it (Deuteronomy 28:38).

The locust shall possess all your trees and the produce of your ground (Deuteronomy 28: 42).

Additionally, Rabbi Kohen contends that this reoccurring miracle of God was for the purpose of protecting the Jewish homeland from occupation by foreign Gentiles. In other words, God purposefully made the land desolate so that it could be preserved for the Jews when He would regather them in the end times — at which time the land would be reclaimed.²⁶

A Palestinian Lie

Incredibly, today the Palestinians are claiming that the land was never desolate despite all these written testimonies and books of photographs that clearly show Palestine to be a wasteland before the beginning of the 20th Century. They are also claiming that the Jews stole the land from them when they started returning in the early 1900s.²⁷

These claims are nothing but a fairy tale. The Jews did not steal any land from anyone. Although God had given them an eternal title to the land, they purchased the land that they occupied when

they began returning. And the Arabs who sold them the land, laughed all the way to the bank. They thought the Jews were fools to purchase a land denuded of trees and full of malaria-infested swamps. The Arabs were, of course, unaware of the promise of God to redeem the land and make it like the Garden of Eden whenever the Jews were regathered to their homeland (Ezekiel 36:35).

Let's turn our attention now to seven remarkable prophecies about the Jewish people that were fulfilled in whole or in part during the 20th Century.