

Chapter 8

The Reclamation of the Land of Israel

As we saw in chapter 4, when the Jews started returning to their homeland in the 1890s, they did not find a land “flowing with milk and honey.” Instead, they were faced with trying to eke out a living in a desolate wasteland plagued with malaria-infested swamps. They paid exorbitant prices for the land, and the Arabs who lived there (people who considered themselves to be either Syrians or Turks) laughed all the way to the bank.

But God had promised that when the Jews returned, He would cause their land to be rejuvenated, transforming it from desolation to abundance.

The Prophetic Promises

Isaiah foretold that a day would come when the “Lord will comfort Zion” by restoring her “waste places” and making “her wilderness . . . like Eden and her desert like the garden of the LORD” (Isaiah 51:3). Isaiah proceeded to wax eloquent by saying that when this occurs, “joy and gladness will be found [in the land]” together with “thanksgiving and the sound of a melody” (Isaiah 51:3).

Isaiah also prophesied specifically about the replanting of the forests and the provision of water to the desert. Quoting the Lord, he wrote (Isaiah 41:18-19):

18) “I will open rivers on the bare heights and springs in the midst of the valleys; I will make the wilderness a pool of water and the dry land fountains of water.

19) “I will put the cedar in the wilderness, the acacia and the myrtle and the olive tree; I will place the juniper in the desert together with the box tree and the cypress . . .”

And for what purpose will the Lord do this? Isaiah states it will be done so that the Jewish people “may see and recognize and consider and gain insight . . . that the hand of the LORD has done this, and the Holy One of Israel has created it” (Isaiah 41:20).

The most detailed prophecy concerning the reclamation of the land is to be found in Ezekiel 36:8-12 where the Lord tells the prophet specifically to “prophesy concerning the land of Israel:”

8) “But you, O mountains of Israel, you will put forth your branches and bear your fruit for My people Israel; for they will soon come.

9) “For, behold, I am for you, and I will turn to you, and you will be cultivated and sown.

10) “I will multiply men on you, all the house of Israel, all of it; and the cities will be inhabited and the waste places will be rebuilt.

11) “I will multiply on you man and beast; and they will increase and be fruitful; and I will cause you to be inhabited as you were formerly and will treat you better than at the first. Thus you will know that I am the LORD.

12) “Yes, I will cause men — My people Israel — to walk on you and possess you, so that you will become their inheritance and never again bereave them of children.”

Ezekiel sums up his prophecies concerning the restoration in two verses that are astounding (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.’”

“Like the Garden of Eden”! And just like Isaiah, Ezekiel says the result will be that both Jews and Gentiles will come to realize that the Lord is faithful to fulfill His prophetic promises (Ezekiel 36:36).

Reclaiming the Land

When the Jewish people began returning to their homeland in the early 1900s, they organized themselves into fortress-like communities called either a kibbutz or a moshav.¹ These were collective farms that provided mutual help to their members and protection from Arab attacks.

The pioneers went to work immediately, attempting to drain the swamps and get rid of the malaria infested mosquitos. Eucalyptus trees were imported from Australia and planted around the perimeters of the swamps.² They were selected because of their reputation for absorbing large amounts of water. When these proved insufficient, canals were dug to drain the swamps to the sea.³

At the same time, the pioneers began replanting the forests of Israel. This was a very serious need. From the Sea of Galilee to the south, all the trees had been cut down. In the Galilee area in the north, there were only 15,000 trees left.⁴

The trees had been cut for firewood and military use, and some forests had been burned for hunting purposes.⁵ The last sizeable remnants of forests had been cut down in the early 20th Century to fire Turkish railway engines.⁶ It is also interesting to note that the Turks taxed trees, so there was an incentive to cut down trees to alleviate the tax burden!⁷

As the trees were being planted and the land cleared of rocks so that it could be recultivated, the rainfall began to increase miraculously. During the 20th Century, it increased 10 percent every decade, for a total increase of over 100 percent!⁸

The JNF

The key to the reclamation of the land of Israel proved to be an amazing organization called The Jewish National Fund.⁹ It was established at the Fifth Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland in 1901. Its sole purpose was to acquire and develop land for Jewish occupation.

In addition to relying on wealthy donors, the JNF raised money in a down-to-earth way by distributing collection boxes to Jewish homes. These came to be known as “The Blue Boxes.” During the period between the two world wars, about one million of these tin collection boxes were distributed to Jewish homes throughout the world.¹⁰ From 1902 to the late 1940s, the JNF also sold colorful stamps to raise money.¹¹

The JNF bought its first parcel of land in 1903. It consisted of 50 acres in Hadera, located on the Mediterranean coast, about 25 miles north of Tel Aviv.¹² The organization played a central role in the establishment of the first modern Jewish city — Tel Aviv in 1909.¹³ By 1927, the JNF had purchased a total of over 50,000 acres of land on which 50 communities stood.¹⁴ By the eve of statehood in May 1948, the JNF had acquired 231,290 acres of land.¹⁵

The record of accomplishments of the JNF by the beginning of the 21st Century was truly remarkable. The organization owned 13 percent of the total land in Israel, and it had built 180 dams and reservoirs, developed 25,000 acres of land and established more than 1,000 parks.¹⁶

Reforestation

One of the major projects of the JNF throughout its history has been reforestation. The Bible itself has often served as the guide. For example, one of Israel's foremost authorities on reforestation remembered that Abraham planted tamarisk trees in Beersheba, located in the southern Negev Desert area. Following Abraham's lead, over 2 million of the trees were planted in the same area, and it was determined that the tamarisk really does thrive in areas of scanty rainfall.¹⁷

One of the JNF's most amazing accomplishments during the 20th Century was the planting of more than 240 million trees (and I personally planted at least 100 of them!).¹⁸ Israel was one of only two nations in the world to enter the 21st Century with a net gain of trees.¹⁹

The planting of so many trees curbed the erosion of the soil, contributed to an increase of oxygen in the atmosphere and provided a natural habitat for wild animals and birds.

Water Conservation

The conservation and distribution of water has also played a key role in Israel's reclamation of its land. The major need was to devise a method to transfer water from the Sea of Galilee in the north to the major cities in the south and to the Negev Desert in the extreme south.

In 1953 construction began on a water carrier that would transport water from the Sea of Galilee to the Negev Desert in a complex system of giant pipes, open canals, tunnels, reservoirs and mammoth pumping stations. The National Water Carrier was inaugurated in 1964, with 80 percent of its water being allocated to agriculture and 20 percent for drinking water.²⁰

Another key element was the development of drip irrigation whereby flexible water pipes were spread out on the ground with holes in them to distribute the precious water at the base of each plant. This innovation stopped the waste of water that occurred through evaporation when irrigation was done by spraying water into the air.²¹

As immigrants have continued to flood into Israel over the years, the demand for water has greatly increased. The situation reached a crisis point in 2008 after a decade-long drought. Israel's largest source of fresh water, the Sea of Galilee, had dropped within inches of the "black line" at which point irrevocable salt infiltration would flood the lake and ruin it permanently.²²

Severe water rationing was imposed and low-flow toilets and shower heads were installed nationwide. Additionally, water treatment systems were developed that recaptured 86 percent of used water for irrigation — vastly more than the second most efficient country in the world, Spain, which recycles 19 percent.²³

In 2009 the situation began to turn around due to the construction of desalination plants designed to convert sea water into fresh water. The first had opened in 2005 in Ashkelon, on the Mediterranean coast, 30 miles south of Tel Aviv. The second started operating in 2009 at Hadera, located on the coast about 25 miles north of Tel Aviv. The largest in the world, the Sorek Plant, opened in 2013 and is located ten miles south of Tel Aviv.²⁴ It is capable of producing seven million gallons of potable water every hour!²⁵

Desalination currently provides 785 million cubic yards of water per year — an amazing 55% percent of the nation's water needs.²⁶

Agriculture

The result of all these reclamation efforts has been phenomenal. The land that was desolate at the beginning of the 20th Century is now the bread basket of the Middle East. The nation is now agriculturally self-sufficient except for grain imports.²⁷ It exports agricultural products to both the Arab countries of the Middle East and to the nations of Europe.

When people think of Jews, they normally think of people who have excelled in the area of finance. But modern Jews in Israel have made their mark in agricultural production, military prowess and, in more recent years, high-tech innovations.

Due to the diversity of the land and climate across the country, and all the efforts at reclamation, Israel is able to grow a wide range of crops. Field crops include wheat, sorghum, corn and cotton. Fruit and vegetables grown include citrus, avocados, kiwi fruit, guavas, mangoes and grapes. Additionally, tomatoes, cucumbers, pepper, zucchini and melons are commonly grown throughout the country. Subtropical areas produce bananas and dates, while in the northern hills, apples, pears and cherries are grown.²⁸

The dairies of Israel produce the highest amounts of milk per animal in the world.²⁹ Israel is one of the world's leading fresh citrus producers and exporters, including oranges, grapefruit and tangerines.³⁰ The Israelis have developed the world's first long shelf-life commercial tomato varieties.³¹ Overall, Israel is the world's leader in agricultural research and development.³²

Israel produces vast quantities of flowers for export. In fact, Israel produces 5 percent of the world's flowers and is surpassed in production only by the Netherlands and Kenya.³³ The process for picking, packing and distribution is so streamlined that flowers can be delivered to Europe via temperature-controlled jets within two days of their harvest.³⁴

Today, Israel is focusing on the greening of the Negev Desert which constitutes 55 percent of the nation's land. They have devised water conservation techniques to save the one inch of rainfall per year in the Negev. They have also genetically engineered plants to grow on the brackish water reservoirs that exist below the surface of the desert. They have even developed a strain of potatoes that thrive in a hot, dry climate like a desert and can be irrigated with salt water.³⁵

As a result of these efforts, half a million Jews now live in the desert, in 250 thriving agricultural settlements.³⁶ The American Society for Horticultural Sciences recently stated that Israel's desert agricultural technology is "one of the most significant advances in food production in the past 1,000 years."³⁷ Today, over 10,000 Israeli brackish water specialists are training agronomists and farmers in 54 countries around the world.³⁸

Perhaps the most amazing thing that can be said about the reclamation of the land and the agriculture it has produced is that the United Nations, which normally specializes in condemning Israel, has declared that Israel is "the most agriculturally efficient land on earth."³⁹

Prophecy Fulfilled

Can there be any doubt that Ezekiel's astounding prophecy about the reclamation of the land of Israel in the end times has been fulfilled? Read it again (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.'"

Or consider again this prophecy of Isaiah (Isaiah 51:3):

Indeed, the LORD will comfort Zion;
He will comfort all her waste places.
And her wilderness He will make like Eden,
And her desert like the garden of the LORD;
Joy and gladness will be found in her,
Thanksgiving and sound of a melody.

Can there be any doubt that the detailed fulfillment of these prophecies proves that God is on the throne and that He is in control of history? Can there be any doubt that He has a very specific purpose for the Jewish People in the end times? And can there be any doubt that God is going to accomplish all His purposes among the Jewish people?