

## GEOGRAPHIA SACRA

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How lovely is your dwelling-place, O LORD Almighty!  
My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the LORD;  
my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God.  
(Psalm 84:1-2)

**Abstract:** A major characteristic of a nation is its territory. As far as Israel is concerned, the geographical/geopolitical dimension plays a decisive role. The Jewish history and religion are shaped by geography. The Land of Israel has its roots in God's Covenant with Abraham as a Promised Land. After Israel got out of Egypt, it received the Law that named the borders and the practices that God required of Israel. Israel had to fight with their arms in order to conquer the country and to fight with their souls (obeying God) to maintain it. That is why Asirian and Babylonian exiles were regarded by Jewish prophets and also by people as God's punishment. The Promised Land was also named the Holy Land. Torah says that God is holy and requires holiness from his people. This deep connection generates blessing and identity. Along with Torah (as spiritual or vertical dimension), the Land (as geographical or horizontal dimension) is a gift of Yahweh that shapes not only the **identity** of Jewish people, but also their **destiny**.

**Key words:** God/Yahweh, promised land, Israel, covenant, law, identity

The Jewish history, religion and culture are obviously related and determined by a territory: *The Holy Land*. "The trend of Palestinian history has been determined in a large measure by that country's place in geopolitical and political framework of the ancient Near East".<sup>1</sup>

As Yohanan Aharoni says, the land's "main geopolitical importance lies in its role as a passageway to the second great centre of ancient civilization, Egypt, the land of the Nile. The strip of desert separating Palestine from Egypt is about 120 miles in length, but is served not only as a partition but also as a corridor between Egypt and the lands of the Fertile Crescent. It constituted the only land bridge between the two continents of Asia and Africa.[...] The position of Palestine as a land bridge between the great world powers surrounding it has made an indelible impression upon its history."<sup>2</sup>

Is it Israel's destiny determined only by the geopolitical dimension? Or is the geopolitical element in a deeper relation with something else? Why is this country called "a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey"<sup>3</sup>, „the most beautiful of all lands"<sup>4</sup>? To what or whom owes them this land? Each

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<sup>1</sup> Yohanan Aharoni, *The Land of the Bible, A Historical Geography*, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1967, p. 3

<sup>2</sup> *ibidem* pp. 5, 6

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 3:8

<sup>4</sup> Ezekiel 20:6

nation values its land and protects it, because it has a meaning of some kind. Speaking of Jewish people, it can be detected a spiritual connection, a sacred dimension of its geography<sup>5</sup>. In their way to the Promised Land, Moses tells to the people: „For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with streams and pools of water, with springs flowing in the valleys and hills, a land with wheat and barley, vines and fig-trees, pomegranates, olive oil and honey, a land where bread will not be scarce and you will lack nothing; a land where the rocks are iron and you can dig copper out of the hills. When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the LORD your God for the good land he has given you.”<sup>6</sup>

“The land of Palestine, the scene of the biblical history, already had a history of thousands of years behind it, when the israelites began to settle there.[...] Although the population was mixed, it was mostly inhabited by Semitic Cananites, but in the coastal plain of southern Palestine there were Philistines, a ‘Sea People’ who gave the land its later name of Palestine. This name arose as a Graeco-Roman designation for a province which derived from the ‘Philistines’ (Aramaic *pelista ‘im*).”<sup>7</sup>

It was not there a strong empire, but great cities that controlled large territories.<sup>8</sup> There are many sources for drawing a map of the Promised Land, and among them there can be included some lists from the Hebrew Bible. These lists describe a precise geography: Joshua 13-21, Genesis 10, 2 Chronicles 11: 6-10 and the Major Prophet’s oracles against the nations.<sup>9</sup>

Canaan was a part of the covenant that God had made with Abraham. This promise of God concerning the Land was renewed in each generation. Abraham is promised to own Canaan<sup>10</sup>, the promise is renewed and affirmed to Isaac<sup>11</sup> and Jacob<sup>12</sup>. This is an everlasting covenant, since Yahweh says: “I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God.”<sup>13</sup> The patriarchs take this promise for granted and include it in their blessings<sup>14</sup>.

Though Abraham’s tribe lived in the Promised Land, it didn’t belong to them as their property. The lands they owned were those parts they had bought from the canaanites<sup>15</sup>. This is why the early Jews based their relationships with peoples of Canaan on alliances.

After the great event of exodus, Moses created the proper context so that Israel may possess the Promised Land. Israel had to fight against the nations that had lived on those lands<sup>16</sup>; they had to divide the land fairly for the tribes of

<sup>5</sup> John Stott, *Să înțelegem Biblia*, Romflair Press, 1993, p. 24

<sup>6</sup> Deuteronomy 8:7-10

<sup>7</sup> Hans Kung, *Judaism*, SCM Press, London, 1992, p. 45

<sup>8</sup> Samuel J. Schultz, *Călătorie prin Vechiul Testament*, Imprimeria de Vest, Oradea, 1992, p. 122

<sup>9</sup> Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, Roland E. Murphy, *Introducere și Comentariu la Sfânta Scriptură*, vol. I, Galaxia Gutenberg, 2005, p. 206

<sup>10</sup> Genesis 12:7, 13:14-15, 15:18-21

<sup>11</sup> Genesis 26:3

<sup>12</sup> Genesis 28:13, 35:12

<sup>13</sup> Genesis 17:7-8

<sup>14</sup> Genesis 28:4

<sup>15</sup> Genesis 23, 48:21-22, 33: 18-19

<sup>16</sup> Numbers 33:50-53, 55

Israel<sup>17</sup>; the borders were to be precisely established<sup>18</sup>. There were also other cultic regulations regarding the life in the Promised Land.<sup>19</sup>

The land had to be conquered and the man designed to lead the battles was Joshua. It was God who requested that the land should be conquered<sup>20</sup>, so these battles had also a religious meaning. The battles had to be prepared *militarily* and *spiritually*. This generation that was about to conquer the land had to be circumcised and also had to celebrate the Passover. Only after this spiritual dimension is considered by the people, the angel appears to Joshua privately. Meanwhile, the Canaanite tribes were terrified by the fact that Israel is drawing closer to the land.<sup>21</sup>

The land was conquered in several steps. It was a rough war, because those nations made military alliances against the Jews. After conquering the land, Israel settled in, according to a precise order of the tribes. Thus, it was understood that Yahweh's promise was fulfilled<sup>22</sup>. Hans Kung says that "no matter what religious understanding the invading Israelites may have had of themselves, for the people of Israel at a later stage it became increasingly important that the land promised by God also belong to God's people. The Hebrew Bible leaves that in no doubt."<sup>23</sup> Years after these events, under social and political changes, Israel became a powerful monarchy.

The Land is promised and given to Israel by God, as long as they obey Him.<sup>24</sup> Obeying God means to be holy, to be dedicated to Him. Thus, their land is the Holy Land. The land is considered to be given by God, as a part of the abrahamic covenant. As long as Israel stays in the covenant, they are blessed in the country. Only if they disregard the covenant, their ownership of the country will be in danger. The Babylonian and Assyrian exile that followed is regarded as a punishment of God and the return from exile as a consequence of their repentance before God.

In the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C. the ten tribes in the North were destroyed by Asirian invasion and in 586 B. C. the two tribes from the South were taken into the Babylonian exile. But in 538 B. C., under the reign of Cyrus, the Jews returned to their land and started rebuilding the Temple.

The Temple was destroyed for the second time by the Romans, in the first century, A.D., the only part remaining being the Western wall. Though the Jews were scattered all over the world, the deep sense of belonging to the Promised Land have never disappeared. As they read Torah, they keep thinking that Yahweh's promise is everlasting. As they pray, they ask Yahweh to return to Jerusalem and dwell there. As they celebrate the Pessah, after retelling the story and after having the ceremonial meal, in the evening, the head of the family utters in solemn voice: *L'shanah haba 'ah b' Yerushalayim* ("Next year, in Jerusalem").<sup>25</sup> In this way, the history, as sacred history meets the future, an eschatological dimension, which becomes the reason of fighting for the land.

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<sup>17</sup> Numbers 33:54

<sup>18</sup> Numbers 34:1-15

<sup>19</sup> Silviu Tatu, *Dumnezeu a vorbit in vechine prin profeti*, Romanian Bible Society, Oradea, 2007, pp. 67-68

<sup>20</sup> Joshua 1:2-5

<sup>21</sup> Silviu Tatu, *op. cit.*, pp. 68-69

<sup>22</sup> Joshua 21:43-45

<sup>23</sup> Hans Kung, *op. cit.*, p. 45

<sup>24</sup> Deuteronomy 4:25-26, 6:18-19, 8:1, 11:8-9, 16:20

<sup>25</sup> Lavinia & Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *Introducere in iudaism*, Editura Hasefer, București, 2000, p. 61

Israel's identity comes first from its relationship with God. The relationship with God, as we have seen, is established in the covenant, which includes the Promised Land. As the book of Deuteronomy says, each Jew had to offer the first fruits of his labour to God, saying: "My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous. But the Egyptians ill-treated us and made us suffer, putting us to hard labour. Then we cried out to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our misery, toil and oppression. So the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with miraculous signs and wonders. He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey".<sup>26</sup>

Hans Kung says that, „for Judaism, the relation to this particular land, the ‚promised‘ land, is quite essential.[...] Along with election, deliverance and covenant, the promise of the land is a basic element of Israelite faith. Yahweh's chosen people and the promised land now belong together.”<sup>27</sup>

The conflict in the Middle East has its roots, as far as Israel is concerned, in this spiritual-religious dimension. Many agree that „it is clear that religious identities (symbols, rituals, values, and so on) have crucially affected the perceptions and behaviors of even those Israelis and Palestinians who do not define themselves as religious or observant. Obviously, to ignore the role of religion in any conflict, but especially in the Middle East, and to presume that the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians is purely secular, would be a superficial understanding of the conflict. Religion in this region of the world has never been distinct from politics.”<sup>28</sup>

Although the religious aspect is obvious, „Israeli and Palestinian leaders have signed many agreements and accords, but none make reference to the religious dimension of the conflict. This was true even in the negotiations for access to Rachel's Tomb in Betlehem and Joseph's Grave in Nablus. By failing to integrate the religious dimension of the conflict, these political agreements and processes have alienated significant segments of both Palestinian and Israeli societies.”<sup>29</sup>

There have been many attempts to solve the territory crisis in the Middle East. As far as Israel is concerned, for the Zionist movement the Jew's right to the land stems from three major sources: religious; political continuity; security. The first one, affirms the belief that God promised the land of Israel to the Jews. The Zionist movement had established a strong link between the nature of the Jewish state and Judaism.<sup>30</sup>

Israel has a difficult question to answer: how can be peace obtained, without a compromise regarding the land? „The real heroes of this process of transformation from war to peace will be those who deeply cherish the land, who feel that they own it and that God gave it to them, but are willing to give up part of it, out of a sense of justice and a commitment to peace. The best gestures of peacemaking do not involve a begrudging surrender of what one does not really want anyway, but an act of sacrifice. Often the other side will have to make a

<sup>26</sup> Deuteronomy 26:5-9

<sup>27</sup> Hans Kung, *op. cit.*, pp. 45-46

<sup>28</sup> Mohammed Abu-Nimer, Amal Khoury, Emily Welty, *Unity in Diversity, Interfaith Dialogue in the Middle East*, USIP Press, Washington D. C., 2007, p. 43

<sup>29</sup> *ibidem*, p. 45

<sup>30</sup> *ibidem*, p. 44

supreme sacrifices as well and they must see their opponents doing the same thing.”<sup>31</sup>

Beyond all human efforts, beyond the capacity to sacrifice and compromise, Israelis must never forget that a restored relationship with Yahweh will open their future in an unexpected way. This is the lesson of the past, this is the solution for the future.

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<sup>31</sup> Marc Gopin, *Holy War, Holy Peace, How Religion Can Biring Peace to the Middle East*, Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 127