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# "A Land without a People for a People without a Land"

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#### http://www.meforum.org/1877/a-land-without-a-people-for-a-people-without

"A land without a people for a people without a land" is one of the most oft-cited phrases in the literature of Zionism—and perhaps also the most problematic. Anti-Zionists cite the phrase as a perfect encapsulation of the fundamental injustice of Zionism: that early Zionists believed Palestine was uninhabited,[1] that they denied—and continue to reject—the existence of a distinct Palestinian culture,[2] and even as evidence that Zionists always planned on an ethnic cleansing of the Arab population.[3] Such assertions are without basis in fact: They both deny awareness on the part of early Zionists of the presence of Arabs in Palestine and exaggerate the coalescence of a Palestinian national identity, which in reality only developed in reaction to Zionist immigration.[4] Nor is it true, as many anti-Zionists still assert, that early Zionists widely employed the phrase.

#### Origins of the Phrase

Many commentators, such as the late Arab literary theorist Edward Said, erroneously attribute the first use of the phrase to Israel Zangwill, a British author, playwright, and poet.[5] In fact, the phrase was coined and propagated by nineteenth-century Christian writers.

In 1831, Muhammad Ali Pasha, the ruler of Egypt, wrested control of Greater Syria from direct Ottoman control, a political change which led the British Foreign Ministry to send a consul to Jerusalem. This development catalyzed the popular imagination.

The earliest published use of the phrase appears to have been by Church of Scotland clergyman Alexander Keith in his 1843 book The Land of Israel According to the Covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob.[6] Keith was an influential evangelical thinker whose most popular work, Evidence of the Truth of the Christian Religion Derived from the Literal Fulfillment of Prophecy,[7] remains in print almost two centuries after it was first published. As an advocate of the idea that Christians should work to encourage the biblical prophecy of a Jewish return to the land of Israel, he wrote that the Jews are "a people without a country; even as their own land, as subsequently to be shown, is in a great measure a country without a people."[8] Keith was aware that the Holy Land was populated because he had traveled

to Palestine in 1839 on behalf of the Church of Scotland and returned five years later with his son, George Skene Keith, believed to be the first photographer to visit to the Holy Land.

In July 1853, British statesman and social reformer Lord Shaftesbury wrote to Foreign Minister George Hamilton Gordon, Lord Palmerston, that Greater Syria was "a country without a nation" in need of "a nation without a country... Is there such a thing? To be sure there is: the ancient and rightful lords of the soil, the Jews!"[9] Shaftesbury elaborated in his diary that these "vast and fertile regions will soon be without a ruler, without a known and acknowledged power to claim dominion. The territory must be assigned to some one or other. There is a country without a nation; and God now in his wisdom and mercy, directs us to a nation without a country."[10] A subsequent Shaftesbury biography sold well and exposed a wider audience to the phrase.[11]

The year after Shaftesbury's first use, a writer in a Presbyterian magazine told readers that, "Surely the land without a people, and the people without a land, are intended soon to meet and mutually possess each other"[12] and, in an 1858 essay, yet another Scottish Presbyterian, Horatius Bonar, advocated the "Repatriation of Israel... [in which] we have a people without a country, as well as a country without a people."[13]

Following an 1881 trip to the Holy Land, American William Eugene Blackstone, another Christian advocate of restoring a Jewish population to Palestine, wrote that this "phase of the question [of what to do with Jews subject to tsarist persecution] presents an astonishing anomaly—a land without a people, and a people without a land."[14]

Anglicans also favored the concept. In 1884, George Seaton Bowes, a Cambridge University clergyman, advocated the return of Jews to Palestine and also used the phrase, "a land without a people... [for] a people without a land."[15]

John Lawson Stoddard, a Bostonian from a privileged background, grew rich traveling to faraway lands and then giving stereopticon lectures upon his return. In an 1897 travelogue, he exhorts the Jews, "You are a people without a country; there is a country without a people. Be united. Fulfill the dreams of your old poets and patriarchs. Go back, go back to the land of Abraham."[16]

By the late nineteenth century, the phrase was in common use in both Great Britain and the United States among Christians interested in returning a Jewish population to Palestine.[17] Christian use of the phrase continued into the first decades of the twentieth century. In 1901, American missionary and, later, Yale professor, Harlan Page Beach wrote approvingly of the idea that the Jews will one day, "In God's good time, inhabit the land of their forefathers; otherwise we can offer no valid explanation of a people without a land and a land without a people."[18] In her 1902 novel, The Zionist, English writer Winifred Graham (1873-1950) has her Jewish hero stand before the Zionist congress and advocate for the return of "the people without a country to the country without a people."[19] Augustus Hopkins Strong, a prominent American Baptist theologian, used the phrase in 1912[20] and, on December 12, 1917, the lead article in The Washington Post, written by a Christian journalist, used the phrase.

The first use of the phrase by a Zionist did not come until 1901 when Israel Zangwill, probably echoing Shaftesbury's wording, wrote in the New Liberal Review that "Palestine is a country without a people; the Jews are a people without a country." [21]

Jewish Nationalism in Context

Although the image of Palestine as a "land without a people" was most commonly advanced by Christian proponents of a Jewish return to Palestine, it would be wrong to ascribe the perception of Palestine as a

land without a people only to Christians. In the context of the nineteenth century and the many nationalist movements that captured the Western imagination, the notion of a Jewish restoration in Palestine seemed logical, even without religious motivations. In 1891, William Blackstone sent an open letter, known today as the Blackstone Memorial, to U.S. president Benjamin Harrison: "Why shall not the powers which under the treaty of Berlin, in 1878, gave Bulgaria to the Bulgarians and Servia to the Servians now give Palestine back to the Jews? ... These provinces, as well as Roumania, Montenegro, and Greece, were wrested from the Turks and given to their natural owners. Does not Palestine as rightfully belong to the Jews?"[22] Nineteenth-century Westerners associated peoples or nations with territory, and so to be a land without a people did not imply that the land was without people, only that it was without a national political character.

What may be odd, viewed from the Arab perspective, is the lens through which Westerners look at the land. In Western eyes, the eastern Mediterranean is permanently overlaid with the outline of a territory called "the Holy Land," or "the Land of Israel." Because Westerners equate lands with peoples, even post-Christian Westerners expect to find a people identified and coterminous with the Holy Land. Muslims, however, neither perceived Palestine as a distinct country, nor Palestinians as a people. In Ottoman times, the Holy Land and its moderately valuable agricultural districts were subject to rule from Beirut or Damascus, where many of the wealthy Arab families who owned land in Palestine lived. During this period, Arabs thought of the Holy Land as an integral part of Syria, Bilad ash-Sham.[23] The Muslim perception of Syria and Palestine as distinct countries developed in the twentieth century.[24] In Arab eyes in the pre-World War I period, all of Bilad ash-Sham, including portions Christians and Jews saw as the Holy Land, was an integral part of Arab domains and not a separate entity.

Advocates of a Jewish return to Israel, when they thought about the Arab inhabitants at all, assumed the existing Arab population would continue in residence after a Jewish state was established. This outcome appeared workable since all nation-states include ethnic minorities among their citizens.

#### Attack on the Slogan

Opponents of Zionism began to attack the slogan shortly after the Balfour Declaration was issued. In 1918, Ameer Rihami, a Lebanese-American, Christian Arab nationalist, wrote that "I would even say ... 'Give the land without a people to the people without a land' if Palestine were really without a people and if the Jews were really without a land." He argued that Jews needed no homeland in Palestine because they enjoyed everywhere else "equal rights and equal opportunity, to say the least."[25] It was an attitude not limited to Arab nationalists. One early twentieth-century academic Arabist wrote, "Their very slogan, 'The land without a people for the people without a land,' was an insult to Arabs of the country."[26] American journalist William McCrackan said, "We used to read in our papers the slogan of Zionism, 'to give back a people to a Land without a People,' while the truth was that Palestine was already well-peopled with a population which was rapidly increasing from natural causes."[27]

Proponents of a binational state in Palestine employed the phrase when debating mainstream Zionists. Robert Weltsch, editor of the prestigious German Zionist weekly Juedische Rundschau, wrote in August 1925, for example, "We may be a people without a home, but, alas, there is not a country without a people. Palestine has an existing population of 700,000."[28]

Anti-Israel propagandists seized upon the phrase following the 1964 founding of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).[29] In his speech at the United Nations on November 13, 1974, PLO leader Yasir Arafat said, "It pains our people greatly to witness the propagation of the myth that its homeland was a desert until it was made to bloom by the toil of foreign settlers, that it was a land without a people."[30] Likewise, in its November 14, 1988 "Declaration of Independence," the Palestinian National Council

accuses "local and international forces" of "attempts to propagate the lie that 'Palestine is a land without a people.'"[31] Hanan Ashrawi, a PLO spokeswoman and former dean of the faculty of arts of Birzeit University, suggests that the phrase shows that Zionists "sought to deny the very existence and humanity of the Palestinians."[32] Salman Abu Sitta, founder and president of the Palestine Land Society, calls the phrase "a wicked lie in order to make the Palestinian people homeless."[33]

Edward Said cited the phrase to deny Israel's right to exist on the grounds that the Zionist claim to the land was made on the false premise that Palestine was "a land without people."[34] Many Said disciples furthered the argument.[35] Perhaps the best known is Rashid Khalidi, who writes that, "In the early days of the Zionist movement, many of its European supporters—and others—believed that Palestine was empty and sparsely cultivated. This view was widely propagated by some of the movement's leading thinkers and writers, such as Theodore Herzl, Chaim Nachman Bialik, and Max Mandelstamm, with Herzl never even mentioning the Arabs in his famous work, The Jewish State. It was summed up in the widely-propagated Zionist slogan, 'A land without a people for a people without a land."[36]

Khalidi's statement is factually wrong. Rather than check Der Judenstaat, he refers to an academic work that was inaccurate.[37] Herzl mentions the resident population of Palestine, albeit in the context of discussing possible locations for his projected Jewish state. He was prescient in his analysis of the political impact that the inhabitants were likely to have on the Zionist project. Immigration, he explained, "continues till the inevitable moment when the native population feels itself threatened and forces the government to stop a further influx of Jews. Immigration is consequently futile unless we have the sovereign right to continue such immigration."[38] To say that Herzl at the time he wrote Der Judenstaat had little interest in the existing population beyond assessing their probable impact on Zionism is fair. To state that he "never even mentioned" the Arabs of Palestine is untrue. Nor did the phrase "land without a people" ever appear in Herzl's books, letters, or diary.[39]

Khalidi is also guilty of inconsistent methodology in applying rules of grammar. He often uses "a people" in the ordinary manner, as a near-synonym for nation, writing: "The Palestinians are a people with national rights."[40] Or, "This remarkable book recounts how the Palestinians came to be constituted as a people."[41] He justified the terrorism of the second intifada by arguing that the "violence, which has broken out, has been the natural result of a people desiring its independence."[42] Khalidi misunderstands the phrase "a people" only when discussing the phrase "land without a people."[43]

Many other academics and commentators use the phrase to discredit Zionism. Radical journalist Ronald Bleier, for example, cites it as an example of a "wilderness myth" and likens it to Nazi propaganda.[44] Norman Finkelstein, an anti-Israel polemicist who, until he was denied tenure in 2007, taught at DePaul University in Chicago, also linked the phrase to a wilderness myth.[45] Lawrence Davidson, history professor at West Chester University in Pennsylvania, calls it "ethnic cleansing at the conceptual level."[46] Jacqueline Rose, professor of English at Queen Mary University in London, calls the phrase "a blatant lie."[47] Post-Zionists such as Tom Segev and Joel Beinin, who oppose the Jewish character of Israel, have also used criticism of the slogan to further their arguments,[48] as has revisionist historian Benny Morris.[49] Even some Zionists have been induced by these attacks to misunderstand the phrase. In Commentary, Hillel Halkin suggests that photographers angled an early photo of Tel Aviv "to substantiate Zionist claims that the Jews, 'a people without a land,' were returning to Palestine, 'a land without a people."[50]

## A Zionist Slogan?

In the minds of many of Zionism's detractors, the "land without a people" formulation has become a defining element of Zionism's original sin. But to what extent was that slogan actually employed by the

early Zionists? The official Zionist mantra of the era stated that "The aim of Zionism is to create for the Jewish people a home in Palestine secured by public law." Zionist groups used a range of other slogans, including "Torah and Labor," "The Land of Israel for the People of Israel according to the Torah of Israel," and "Zionism, Socialism, and Diaspora Emancipation." These, along with "Jewish State," "Back to the soil," "Return to Zion," "Jewish homeland," "A Palestine open to all Jews," and, by far most frequently, "Jewish national home," were widely-propagated Zionist slogans. In a search of seven major American newspapers—the Atlanta Constitution, Boston Globe, Chicago Tribune, Los Angeles Times, New York Times, Wall Street Journal, and Washington Post[51]—there were more than 3,000 mentions of the phrase "Jewish national home" through 1948. No other Zionist phrase or slogan comes close. In contrast, there are only four mentions of Zangwill's phrasing, "country without a people,"[52] all before 1906. There is no mention of its variants: "land without a people" or "country without a nation." ProQuest's Historical Newspapers database shows one additional use of the phrase before 1972: the 1947 "Text of the Statement before U.N. by Jamal el Husseini on the Arabs' Position on Palestine: Arab Statement Denounces U.N. Proposal for Partitioning Palestine,"[53] in which Husseini charges that "the Zionist organization propagated the slogan 'Give the country without a people to the people without a country."

Despite the claims of Husseini, Said, and Khalidi, it is not evident that this was ever the slogan of any Zionist organization or that it was employed by any of the movement's leading figures. A mere handful of the outpouring of pre-state Zionist articles and books use it.[54] For a phrase that is so widely ascribed to Zionist leaders, it is remarkably hard to find in the historical record.[55]

Attendees at the 1905 Zionist congress associated the phrase with Zangwill,[56] and it appears to have passed out of use along with the rejection of his proposal to establish the Jewish homeland in British East Africa. In the rare instances where the phrase is found in a post-1905 Jewish source, it is usually as a specific reference to Zangwill[57] although sometimes it appears when a Jewish author quotes a Christian writer.[58]

Mainstream writers refer to the phrase as something used briefly and years before. In 1914, Chaim Weizmann referred to the phrase as descriptive of attitudes common in the early days of the movement.[59] Israeli writer and historian Amos Elon dated Zionist use of the phrase to 1903 but said it had faded from the lexicon by 1917.[60] The single use of the phrase in The Maccabean, the journal of the Federation of American Zionists, occurred in 1901.[61] By 1922, Christian journalist William Denison McCrackan described the phrase as no longer in use.[62]

Unless or until evidence comes to light of its wide use by Zionist publications and organizations, the assertion that "a land without a people for a people without a land" was a "widely-propagated Zionist slogan"[63] should be retired.

### A Land without People?

Rashid Khalidi uses the phrase to charge Zionist leaders with believing that the land was "empty."[64] Edward Said actually alters the wording of the phrase to allege that Zionists thought that Palestine was "a land without people."[65]

But travelers such as Keith, Blackstone, Stoddard, and Zangwill (who first visited Israel in 1897 and whose own father went to live there) were well aware of the small Arab population, which Blackstone, at least, addressed when he opined that it would not pose an obstacle to Jewish restoration.[66] If some Zionists believed that Israel was literally empty, it is unlikely that they did so after Ahad Ha'Am's 1891 essay, "Truth from Eretz Yisrael," sparked debate over conditions in Palestine.[67]

Did some Jews imagine the Land of Israel as an abandoned land? Perhaps. But it seems more likely that Jews were capable of knowing on one level that there were enough Arabs in Palestine to stage pogroms in Hebron and Safed in 1834 while still referring to the land as empty. The editors of The Maccabean, for example, estimated in 1901 that there were only 150,000 Arabs in Palestine, perhaps one-third of the true number, and suggested the following year that one-third of the population was already Jewish. They nevertheless characterized Palestine in 1905 as "a good land, but it is an empty land." [68]

Zionism, with its penniless, powerless enthusiasts and grand plans to restore a Jewish commonwealth, was a movement of wishful thinkers. Herzl's treatment of the topic in The Jewish State was typical.[69] He gives the resident population passing mention and only in the context of discussion of political obstacles that lay in the path to building a Jewish state.

Arabs, of course, were recognized by Zionists and others as a people deserving of national sovereignty. As Israel Zangwill put it in the wake of World War I, "The Arabs should recognize that the road of renewed national glory lies through Baghdad, Damascus, and Mecca, and all the vast territories freed for them from the Turks and be content ... The powers that freed them have surely the right to ask them not to grudge the petty strip [Israel] necessary for the renaissance of a still more downtrodden people."[70]

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- [2] See for example, Hanan Ashrawi, Sydney Morning Herald, Nov. 6, 2003.
- [3] Saree Makdisi, "Said, Palestine, and the Humanism of Liberation," Critical Inquiry, 31 (2005): 443; idem, "An Iron Wall of Colonization," Counterpunch, Jan. 26, 2005.
- [4] Muhammad Muslih, The Origins of Palestinian Nationalism (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).
- [5] Edward Said, The Question of Palestine (New York: Times Books, 1979), p. 9.
- [6] Alexander Keith, The Land of Israel According to the Covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob (Edinburgh: William Whyte and Co., 1843), p. 43. An 1844 review of Keith's book in The United Secession Magazine (Edinburgh), vol. 1, p. 189, highlights the phrase with its most common wording: "a land without a people, and a people without a land."
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- [8] Keith, The Land of Israel According to the Covenant with Abraham, p. 43.
- [9] Cited in Adam M. Garfinkle, "On the Origin, Meaning, Use, and Abuse of a Phrase," Middle Eastern Studies, Oct. 1991, p. 543.
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- [11] Edwin Hodder, The Life and Work of the Seventh Earl of Shaftsbury (London: Cassell and Co., 1887), p. 487.

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- [16] John L. Stoddard, Lectures: Illustrated and Embellished with Views of the World's Famous Places and People, Being the Identical Discourses Delivered during the Past Eighteen Years under the Title of the Stoddard Lectures, vol. 2. (Boston: Balch Brothers Co., 1897), p. 113.
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- [19] Eitan Bar-Yosef, The Holy Land in English Culture, 1799-1917: Palestine and the Question of Orientalism (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 236.
- [20] Augustus Hopkins Strong, Miscellanies (Philadelphia: Griffith and Rowland Press, 1912), p. 98.
- [21] Garfinkle, "On the Origin, Meaning, Use, and Abuse of a Phrase," p. 539; Israel Zangwill, "The Return to Palestine," New Liberal Review, Dec. 1901, p. 615.
- [22] Yaakov Ariel, On Behalf of Israel: American Fundamentalist Attitudes toward Jews, Judaism, and Zionism, 1865-1945 (New York: Carlson Publishing, 1991), pp. 70-2.
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- [24] Muslih, The Origins of Palestinian Nationalism, pp. 131-54.
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- [63] Khalidi, Palestinian Identity; p. 101.
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