The Motif of Desolation in Nineteenth-Century Exploration of Palestine

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In 1858, the London firm John Murray published what was probably the first modern travel guide to Palestine. Murray specialized in travel literature; their travel handbooks were the forerunners of the famous Blue Guides. The Palestine guide was written by Josias Leslie Porter, an Irish Presbyterian missionary who had been resident in Damascus for nearly a decade, and was based on his own travels through Palestine in the 1850s. Among the sites he visited (in 1858) was ‘Asqalān – that is, Ashkelon of the Bible, Ascalon of classical and Crusader history, which lay abandoned since its final destruction in 1270 CE. Porter described his first view of the site, after climbing up the earthen ramparts of the city, in this way (from the 1868 edition):

Clambering up the broken battlements, we have Ascalon spread out before us—no! not Ascalon, only the place where it once stood. The northern and larger section of the site is now covered with gardens, divided by rough stone fences, and filled with vines, pomegranates, figs, and apricots, in addition to luxuriant beds of onions and melons. Scarcely a fragment of a ruin can be seen from this spot except the broken wall. As I sat here one morning I counted 5 yokes of oxen ploughing, 2 drawing water for irrigation, and 28 men and women engaged in agricultural work! Such is one section of Ascalon. The remaining portion is even more terribly desolate.¹

The description is remarkable. Porter immediately follows a fairly detailed report on the thriving fields and gardens of Ashkelon with the implication that they are “terribly desolate.” What explains what seems, to us, such an unexpected characterization?

This paper is the beginning of an attempt to articulate an answer. And at the root of this answer

lies a single concept: the Bible. Scholarship has focused for some time now on the imagined geography of the Holy Land in the nineteenth century – or its “scriptural geography,” as Edwin Aiken calls it -- and how the surprising landscape that confronted nineteenth-century visitors was interpreted through religious lenses. But there has been little attention paid in such accounts to the physical geography; and therefore little attention to how the Biblical lens of these travelers actively distorted how they saw the landscape right in front of them. And even less attention has been paid to specific case studies. Here I will focus on these issues and how they have influenced subsequent discourse on Palestine, both academic and popular, with particular reference to the site of Ashkelon and the southern coastal plain.

Desolation in Travelers' Accounts

The nineteenth century is famous for the (Western) “rediscovery” of Palestine. Clergymen like Edward Robinson and Alexander Keith, naturalists like F.W. Sieber and Henry Baker Tristram, historians like Emmanuel Guillaume Rey and Joseph François Michaud, artists like David Roberts, authors like Mark Twain – all were drawn for one reason or another to visit the Land of Israel. But above all, as might be gauged from this selective list of travelers, the nineteenth century marked the rediscovery of Palestine by European and American Protestants, who came on pilgrimages to Palestine in much greater numbers than ever before. Thus Thomas Cook, purveyor of package tours to the Holy Land in the second half of the nineteenth century, wrote favorably of the ability
Murray [i.e., Murray’s guide to Palestine] in the other, to trace out sites and scenes immortalized by imperishable events.  

Ashkelon was one of the places typically on their itineraries, due to its role in Crusader, classical, and especially biblical history. Directly on the seashore, Ashkelon was removed from the main north-south coastal road (a remnant of the medieval Cairo-Damascus highway and the ancient Via Maris), which ran not along the shore but about five kilometers inland at this point. As a result, not everyone visited the site; among those missing it was the pioneering scholar Edward Robinson, sometimes referred to as the “father of biblical geography” or the “father of biblical archaeology.” But many did visit. And many claimed to have seen desolation. I have surveyed thirty accounts of scholars and other travelers who visited Ashkelon during the nineteenth century. Of these, more than half (18) describe Ashkelon as “desolate.” Why is this description of flourishing gardens and orchards so prevalent?

If we open up a Bible, especially the King James Version shared by most if not all of these travelers, we will readily find the answer. In particular, there is Zephaniah’s prophecy concerning Philistia: “For Gaza shall be forsaken, and Ashkelon a “desolation” (Zeph. 2:4). Several of the accounts – including Porter’s travel handbook – directly quote this prophecy along with their description of the site as “desolate.” Many accounts also emphasize that the site of the ancient city itself was uninhabited, sometimes even making a pointed juxtaposition to the Arab village of Jura just outside its walls. Again, this emphasis results from biblical prophecy, this time Zechariah: “Ashkelon shall not be inhabited” (Zech. 9:5).

In fact, references to “desolation” at Ashkelon increase over the course of the nineteenth century

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– at the same time that the descriptions of gardens and orchards also become more elaborate. The image of desolation thus becomes more popular in a process that has no direct connection to the physical reality of the site. We can see this illustrated clearly in the case of Porter’s written output. The passage from the original 1858 edition of the Murray guide to Palestine does not describe the gardens and orchards as “desolate”; instead, we read that the “remaining portion is even more terribly fallen.”6 That is, the description of Ashkelon was purposefully changed in order to have it fall in line with the prophecies of Scripture, although whether by Porter himself or by the publishing company is unclear. Regardless of Porter’s agency in the revised edition, we can see the tendency towards scriptural harmonization continue in his later work. By 1883, Porter’s description of the same initial view of the ruined city has undergone significant revision:

The whole site was standing before me, and not a fragment of a house standing. One small section was covered with little gardens; but over the rest of the site lay smooth rounded hillocks of drifting sand. . . After looking on that sad scene, I read the words of Zephaniah:—‘Ascalon shall be a desolation;’ and of Zechariah:—‘Ascalon shall not be inhabited’ (Zeph. ii. 4; Zech. ix.5); and when I considered that these words were penned nearly two thousand years before Ascalon fell, the truth was impressed upon my mind, as it had never been before, that the Spirit of God alone could have inspired those prophetic words.7

Porter makes a number of rhetorical moves in this passage that are striking when compared to the earlier description in the handbook. Porter’s view has become panoptic, as he drops the qualifier “can be seen from this spot.” At the same time, his description of the standing ruins changes from “[s]carcely a fragment” to “not a fragment.” As it happens, we know that Porter’s claim that there were

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7 Porter, Illustrations of Bible Prophecy and History from Personal Travels in Palestine (Dublin: Hodges, Figgis, and Co., 1883), 21.
no standing buildings is incorrect: there was a well-preserved Byzantine church towards the southern end of the site (fig. 1), and the then-completely intact medieval Maqam el-Khadra on the top of the central mound along the sea cliff (fig. 2), along with more fragmentary remains of other buildings. As for the gardens, Porter initially reported that they cover the majority of the site, whereas by 1883 they only cover “[o]ne small section.” Again, the accounts of several other visitors demonstrate that Porter’s later version is factually incorrect. Of particular interest is the first known modern plan of Ashkelon, made by the important Crusader historian E.G. Rey upon his visit to the site, a year after Porter’s (fig. 3). On that plan, “jardins” are clearly visible through most of the site. The prevalence of gardens at the site is further confirmed by the plan made in 1875 by the Survey of Western Palestine, the first systematic map survey to cover most of the country. Here we also note that the sand dunes, far from covering most of the site, are restricted to the southeast corner. Porter also suggests in the later passage that his view was only subsequently reinforced by his reading of Scripture. In fact, as we can see through this analysis, Porter’s entire description of the site has been gradually embellished under the influence of those same scriptural passages.

While the prophecies of Zephaniah and Zechariah are key to understanding this process for accounts of Ashkelon, they are far from the whole story. To some extent, the descriptions of desolate Ashkelon are simply part of a much larger discourse: travelers’ accounts and scholarly reports of nineteenth-century Palestine are full of descriptions of desolation throughout the country. And again, a major explanation for this ubiquitous characterization should be sought in the Bible. The King James Version has the words “desolate” or “desolation” a total of 188 times; these are concentrated in the Old Testament (176 times), and especially in the prophetic books. This concentration is not surprising: the

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9 Porter’s embellished (distorted) 1883 description in turn became very influential; it was quoted in the widely-used Pulpit Commentary: H.D.M. Spence-Jones and J.S. Exell, The Pulpit Commentary (New York and London: Funk & Wagnalls, 1890s), 32:26. The Pulpit Commentary is still quoted in online resources for conservative Christian Bible readers today, such as Bible Hub. For the quotation of Porter’s 1883 description of Ashkelon, see http://biblehub.com/commentaries/zephaniah/2-4.htm
biblical “prophecies” of desolation refer to the widespread destruction experienced by the authors in their own times, caused by Assyrian conquest in the late eighth century BCE and especially by Babylonian conquest a little over a century later. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Lamentations, and some of the minor prophets are naturally preoccupied with the desolation of Jerusalem and Judah; but there are also descriptions of surrounding regions devastated by Assyria and Babylonia, such as Philistia. In the context of nineteenth-century travelers’ accounts, then, Ashkelon is far from alone; it is merely a particularly striking example, one where the physical landscape is demonstrably quite strikingly distinct from the imagined one.

For many nineteenth-century writers, especially conservative Christian ministers, visiting sites like Ashkelon was meant to affirm the literal truth of Scripture. Porter is a classic example. Not only do we see this motivation in the title of his 1883 work (*Illustrations of Bible Prophecy and History from Personal Travels in Palestine*), but this outlook suffuses his writing. To take just one example, consider Porter’s description of Bashan (in present-day Jordan), where he carried out important explorations. For Porter, “in a word, THE WHOLE OF BASHAN AND MOAB IS ONE GREAT FULFILLED PROPHECY.”

Of course, just as with Ashkelon, the desolation of the land as a whole was to some extent the product of reading through biblical lenses. By contrast, other visitors to Palestine saw the land quite differently. One of these was the prominent Zionist writer Ahad Ha'am; as he wrote in an often-quoted passage:

From abroad, we are accustomed to believe that Eretz Israel is presently almost totally desolate, an uncultivated desert, and that anyone wishing to buy land there can come and buy all he

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10 For a detailed discussion of Porter’s writings and how they reflect an interest in biblical prophecy fulfilled in Palestine, see Aiken, *Scriptural Geography*, 89-132.
wants. But in truth it is not so. In the entire land, it is hard to find tillable land that is not already tilled; only sandy fields or stony hills, suitable at best for planting trees or vines and, even that, after considerable work and expense in clearing and preparing them—only these remain unworked, because the Arabs do not like to exert themselves today for a distant future.¹²

But these more realistic reports hardly affected conservative Christian views of the land. And these Christian missionaries and ministers had an influence that stretched far beyond the believers that read their works. In some ways, their writings affected—and continue to affect—Zionist thinkers as well as scholars studying Palestine, ancient or modern. In the rest of this paper I would like to draw some preliminary connections between these seemingly disparate movements.

*Alexander Keith's Desolation and Zionist Thought*

Another minister preoccupied with biblical prophecy to visit Ashkelon in the nineteenth century was Scotsman Alexander Keith. Keith was the author of one of the most popular books of the century on Palestine, *Evidence of the Truth of the Christian Religion derived from the Literal Fulfilment of Prophecy*. First published in the 1820s, within three decades it was in its thirty-seventh edition.¹³

Later editions of *Evidence* included a series of engravings based on historic early photographs of Palestine taken by Keith's son, George Skene Keith, who accompanied his father on a journey to the Holy Land in 1844. At Ashkelon, the younger Keith took the first known photograph of the site (fig. 4).

The image shows a small group of column fragments located near the center of the site of the ancient

¹² Ahad Ha'am, Emet me-Eretz Yisrael in *Kol Kitvei Ahad Ha'am* (Tel Aviv: Devir, 1947). The essay was originally published in segments in *Hamelitz* (St. Petersburg), June 1891. The translation here is by Alan Dowty, Much Ado about Little: Ahad Ha'am's 'Truth from Eretz Yisrael,' Zionism, and the Arabs, *Israel Studies* 5 no. 2 (Fall 2000): 154-181, at 161-162.

city, with the fragmentary city walls topping the ramparts in the background. The photograph of the column pile in front of the ruined walls was a perfect illustration of Ashkelon's desolation – not only for Keith, but for several visitors to the site in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Frenchmen Comte de Forbin (in 1817-18)\textsuperscript{14} and Comte Joseph d'Estourmel (in 1832; \textbf{fig. 5}) had already depicted almost the same view; decades later, it would feature in the work of British lieutenant Donald Maxwell, commissioned to make illustrations of Palestine for the Imperial War Museum during the First World War.\textsuperscript{15} Other remains at the site, too, proved popular as illustrations of desolation, and often visitors had photographs taken of themselves with those remains. The ruins of Ashkelon's ancient and medieval fortifications were a popular choice; among the visitors to pose with them was a group of Zionists including Arthur Ruppin, sitting on a fragment of the former city wall in 1909 (\textbf{fig. 6}).

In a revealing passage from another of his works about the Holy Land, Keith's motivations for his interest in biblical prophecy become clear:

> The Israelites continued not in the first covenant which the Lord made with them: therefore are they wanderers throughout the world, who have nowhere found a place on which the sole of their foot could rest—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.\textsuperscript{16}

The desolation of Palestine is intimately connected with the Exile of the Jews. Here Keith frames it in terms of their unfaithfulness to God as reflected in the Old Testament. But this unfaithfulness is inseparable from his view of the later Jewish rejection (and killing) of Jesus:

\begin{footnotes}
\bibitem{Forbin} Comte A. de Forbin, \textit{Voyage dans le Levant en 1817 et 1818} (Paris: Imprimerie Royale, 1819), pl. 42 (by Constant Bourgeois).
\bibitem{Maxwell} D. Maxwell, The Ruins of Askelon (Art.IWM ART 2409) \url{http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/17795}
\bibitem{Keith} A. Keith, \textit{The Land of Israel, according to the Covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob} (Edinburgh: William Whyte and Co., 1843), 33-34 (emphasis in original).
\end{footnotes}
Immediately before judgment came upon them after the crucifixion of Jesus, the country beyond Jordan was marked by its inferiority to that on its western side. Now the contrast is reversed. And marking this apparently strange diversity or reversal of the relative richness now, it may not be meet, while in the midst of a land that everywhere bears marks of moral retribution, to overlook the fact, that when Jesus, shortly before his crucifixion, went beyond Jordan, when in Jewry they sought to kill him, many believed on him there, while the cities of Judah rejected him, and he was crucified beyond the walls of Jerusalem. Gilead, though blighted, is still glorious in its beauty, while the mountains, and plains, and cities of Judah, like the places around Jerusalem, are utterly waste, and the very land that would not hear the messenger of the Lord, but slew the Lord of glory, has been smitten with a heavy curse.17

The focus on desolation, then, is motivated by a form of anti-Jewish polemic: the Jews were exiled from the Land of Israel, and the Holy Land was cursed in the absence of its native people. Keith’s understanding of biblical prophecy, like that other nineteenth-century ministers such as Josias Leslie Porter, was simply the latest in a long line going back to the early Church fathers.18 There was particular interest in these prophecies and in clerical applications of them in the nineteenth century by millenarians: the restoration of the Jews was an essential condition of the coming of the end of days. It is therefore quite ironic that, as Diana Muir has shown, Keith's anti-Jewish polemic is likely the ultimate origin of the phrase “A land without a people, for a people without a land,” popularized by the Zionist writer Israel Zangwill.19 Based on the work of Muir and Adam Garfinkle, it appears that

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17 Keith, The Land of Israel, 361.
18 As just one example, consider the case of William Whiston – a mathematician who succeeded Isaac Newton as Lucasian Chair at Cambridge, but now best known as a translator of Josephus: “It is very remarkable that Titus did not people this now desolate country of Judea, but ordered it to be all sold; nor indeed is it properly peopled at this day, but lies ready for its old inhabitants the Jews, at their future restoration” (Whiston, The Genuine Works of Flavius Josephus, vol. 6 [Worcester, MA: Isaiah Thomas, 1794], 168). Whiston also authored a book on The Accomplishment of Scriptural Prophecies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1708). For Whiston, the restoration of the Jews to Jerusalem was essential for the millennium; see J.E. Force, William Whiston: Honest Newtonian (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
19D. Muir, A Land without a People for a People without a Land, Middle East Quarterly 15 no. 2 (Spring 2008): 55-62
Zangwill himself picked up the phrase via the nineteenth-century English social reformer Lord Shaftesbury, who was also a millenarian Christian.

The fact that the expression “A land without a people for a people without a land” can be traced back from a Zionist writer like Zangwill to a Protestant minister like Keith is significant more than just for finding the origin of that phrase. It is very suggestive for helping to trace the intellectual history of Zionist images of Palestine more generally. The cluster of ideas about desolation and lack of people in nineteenth-century Protestant thinking that I have outlined above was also quite common in early Zionist thought. Clearly it was already popular by the early 1890s, when Ahad Ha'am felt the need to counter it (in the passage quoted above). Were these broader Zionist conceptions indebted to anti-Jewish polemic? Certainly both Protestant theology and Zionist thought tended to distort the physical reality of the landscape in similar ways, but more work is needed here.

These possibilities, however, mean that we must reassess parts of Muir's and Garfinkle's work. For example, both argue that, since the expression “a land without a people . . .” was not coined by Zionists and was used only by a few Zionists for a short period of time, Zangwill and Zionists in general bear little responsibility for the phrase. But Zangwill was still repeating the phrase in 1920, two decades after his first use of it (see below). More than this, it is not the phrase itself, but the cluster ideas that it expresses, that had a broad impact on the Zionist movement. And here, Muir and Garfinkle are incorrect to suggest that the fact that the phrase is “a land without a people” (and not “a land without people”) is significant. They have argued that this wording means that the charge that early Zionists like Zangwill viewed Palestine as empty is specious; in their view, the Zionist idea is that the land was missing its historic people – an idea of course also expressed by Keith in his anti-Jewish polemic. But this argument misses the fact that no one has claimed that Zionists thought the land was literally empty; the issue is that, for them, the land was figuratively empty (i.e., sparsely inhabited). For


20 See Muir, A Land without a People (section on “A Zionist Slogan?’’); Garfinkle, On the Origin, 546-547.
Keith, as for many millenarians and other believing Christians, there was an intimate connection between the desolation of the land, the past exile of its native people, and its sparse habitation in his day:

>*Bereaving the nations of men,* as foretold, and partly fulfilled, it became during the crusades the common grave of Europe, of Asia, and of Africa, yet it could not be rescued from the hands of infidel but not idolatrous Moslems, but was left to the unmarked progress of decay and desolation, till its once vine-clad mountains are bare, and its cities laid waste, and its plains desolate, and nothing but the scantling of a population left in the land, for the possession of which many myriads had contended, and which in times more ancient had been thickly studded with cities.\(^{21}\)

This same connection is found in the work of Zangwill himself, in 1921, long after he was supposed to have stopped using versions of the phrase “a land without a people”:\(^{22}\)

And if Lord Shaftesbury was literally inexact in describing Palestine as a country without a people, he was essentially correct, for there is no Arab people living in intimate fusion with the country, utilising its resources and stamping it with a characteristic impress: there is at best an Arab encampment, the break-up of which would throw upon the Jews the actual manual labour of regeneration, and prevent them from exploiting the *fellahin*, whose numbers and lower wages are moreover a considerable obstacle to the proposed immigration from Poland and other suffering Jewish centres.\(^{23}\)

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\(^{21}\) Keith, *The Land of Israel*, x (emphasis in original). Similarly, Whiston (in the quote above) connects the ancient desolation of Judea, the exile of the Jews, and the fact that in his day the land was not “properly peopled.”

\(^{22}\) Muir, *A Land without a People*; cf. Garfinkle, *On the Origin*, 542, who suggests that by this time Zangwill was criticizing other Zionists for promoting the idea that Palestine was empty.

Here Zangwill expresses the idea that the phrase “country without a people” is not literal but essential or figurative. At the same time, he associates this idea with the phrase “Arab encampment”: even though Zangwill goes on to suggest that the number of Arabs in Palestine (and their low wages) presented an obstacle to Jewish immigration, this wording depicts the Arab presence in Palestine as not only temporary but also relatively small. Similarly, when the editors of *The Maccabean* underestimated the Arab population of Palestine as 150,000 on the one hand, and on the other referred to the land as “empty,” these are not contradictory ideas. Rather, minimizing the Arab population (whether consciously or not) is a direct result of seeing the land as – figuratively – empty.

Again, the Zionist lens through which Zangwill and many others viewed Palestine bears a striking similarity to the biblical lens of Christian ministers like Keith and Porter. What is particularly interesting here is not who bears responsibility for a specific phrase, but the larger, tangled web of images and influences, a web that deserves much greater attention.

*Desolation and Modern Scholarship on Palestine*

Not all nineteenth-century visitors to Palestine were like Porter and Keith in believing in the immediate relevance of biblical prophecy to the modern world – in believing that they lived within the time frame

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24 See Muir, Land without a People. Muir imagines these ideas as representing different levels of thought:

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.

Notably, in suggesting that the editors of *The Maccabean* may have underestimated the Arab population by a third, Muir herself may have been underestimating that population. In perhaps the most thorough analysis of late Ottoman and Mandatory population records for Palestine, Justin McCarthy concluded that around the first years of the twentieth century the Arab population may have been closer to 600,000 (McCarthy, *The Population of Palestine: Population History and Statistics of the Late Ottoman Period and the Mandate* [ New York: Columbia University Press, 1990], 16).
of biblical prophecy. But as we have seen, even for those who did not see the fulfillment of prophecy everywhere around them, desolation was a very common motif. Thus, among the visitors to Ashkelon who invoked the image of desolation, and often explicitly the prophecies of Zephaniah and Zechariah, were James T. Barclay, who conducted a notable early surveyor of Jerusalem and discovered Barclay's Gate on the Temple Mount; Henry Baker Tristram, an important naturalist of nineteenth-century Palestine; the Crusader historian Jean-Joseph-François Poujoulat; Charles Warren, one of the main surveyors for the Palestine Exploration Fund in London; Ralph Carr Alderson, lieutenant colonel with the British Royal Engineers who made major contributions to the survey of the Palestinian coast in 1840; Carel van de Velde, an influential Dutch surveyor; the German scholar Conrad Schick; and Victor Guérin, one of the most important explorers of Palestine in the nineteenth century. In other words, this group includes many of the founding figures in the modern study of Palestine: in the study of its archaeology, its geography, and its history. So it is not surprising that the image of desolation has come to take a central place in modern scholarship on Palestine.

While there is an awareness today that nineteenth-century travelers shaped their own scriptural geographies, current scholarship has nevertheless internalized the view that these descriptions of desolation and barrenness are somehow objective. This holds true even for the most reflective writers on the history of archaeology in Palestine. Consider, for example, the words of historian and archaeologist Neil Asher Silberman:

Part of this renewed fascination arose from the fact that the present reality of the land varied so greatly from its Biblical descriptions. The ‘land of milk and honey’ was no longer so fruitful; the thick forests described in the Bible had long since disappeared, leaving the rolling hillsides of the interior rocky and barren. True, along the coast there were extensively cultivated areas, with orange groves, wheat, and cotton, but there were also malarial swamps and relentlessly drifting sand dunes, every year burying more and more of the precious arable land. Many of the
ancient cities and towns mentioned in the Scriptures had seemingly vanished without a trace, and even the holy cities of Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Nazareth were now little more than provincial market towns.25

or historian of archaeology Rachel Hallote:

Volney did not base his travel accounts on preconceptions based in the current situation of the Holy Land. That is, he did not focus on the idea, then commonly held in the popular imagination, that Palestine's desolate appearance and economy was a divine punishment for the sins of the Jews. Instead, he discussed the desolation of the land in realistic terms, explaining how the economic situation had been brought about by high taxation of the peasants by the Ottomans, and by corrupt ruling on the part of local sheiks employed by the Ottoman government.26

or Jewish social historian Elliott Horowitz:

All three travelers to nineteenth-century Palestine—a French Catholic, an English Jewess, and a Scottish Presbyterian—utilized the strategy of displacing the desolate landscape seen by their eyes with the more inspiring sacred history recalled in their minds.27

Even scholars critically reassessing the history of their own fields stop short of reassessing the nature of Palestine's desolation. For Silberman, Hallote, and Horowitz, and for many other modern scholars, it is

only the explanation for that desolation that was distorted through the lens of Bible, not the desolation itself.\(^{28}\) Instead, the desolation is seen as a given – and then becomes an assumption on which new analyses continue to be founded.

This problem is particularly acute, among other places, in the work of modern geographers on late Ottoman Palestine, a field dominated by Israeli scholars. Leading Israeli geographers have again assumed desolation as a given and used it as a baseline for their own scholarship. We can see this problem very clearly in recent environmental histories of Israel like *Between Ruin and Restoration*.\(^{29}\) The title itself takes mythic or theological ways of structuring the past and applies them to scholarly historiography. And the particular mythic structures it uses echo not merely the traditional Jewish themes of Exile and Restoration, but – more directly – the Ruin and Restoration encountered in so much anti-Jewish polemic. The contents, meanwhile, consist of essays that start modern Israel’s environmental history, as so often with the history of Israel more generally, in the late Ottoman period; the earlier situation is, as elsewhere, largely ignored. In their chapter on the late Ottoman period, prominent Israeli geographers Ruth Kark and Noam Levin emphasize that Palestine prior to the nineteenth century was a “neglected backwater” and a “forsaken province.”\(^{30}\) Throughout the chapter, Kark and Levin repeat images of decline and deterioration: for example, decline in the population between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries; and decline in Ottoman administration over the same period, leading to a decline in environmental and living conditions. For support, they rely disproportionately on older scholarship from the 1950s to 1970s: works by Israeli historians and geographers like David Amiran, Uriel Heyd, Amnon Cohen, and Hanna Margalit (as well as Wolf-Dieter Hütteroth and Kamal Abdulfattah). However, broader Ottoman historiography over the last two

\(^{28}\) Contrast these views with that of literary scholar Eitan Bar-Yosef (*The Holy Land in English Culture, 1799–1917: Palestine and the Question of Orientalism* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005], 81-85), for whom the “barren land” is a constructed image.


decades has widely rejected the concept of “Ottoman decline” on display here.\footnote{By “Ottoman decline” I mean the previously dominant scholarly paradigm in which the decline in Ottoman military power between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries was seen as directly effecting a decline in Ottoman administration and, in turn, in living conditions in provincial areas like Palestine. For the rejection of this paradigm, see, e.g., L.T. Darling, *Revenue-Raising and Legitimacy: Tax Collection and Finance Administration in the Ottoman Empire, 1560-1660* (The Ottoman Empire and Its Heritage 6; Leiden: Brill, 1996), 1-21; S. Faroqhi, *Approaching Ottoman History: An Introduction to the Sources* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); D. Quataert, *The Ottoman Empire, 1700 – 1922* (2nd ed.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).} And careful study of sixteenth- and nineteenth-century population data for Palestine suggests that the population was roughly the same in the mid-sixteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries, if not increasing slightly over that period.\footnote{This conclusion is based on my own (unpublished) analysis of Ottoman-period data for the southern coastal plain of Palestine. In both the mid-sixteenth and the mid-nineteenth centuries the population of the Gaza sub-district was approximately 45,000 (one source even suggests a population closer to 60,000 for the mid-nineteenth century). Unfortunately discussion of the methods and analysis is far too complicated to include here. A note on sources: for sixteenth-century sources on the population of the southern coastal plain, there are five *tahrir defter* (Ottoman tax registers). Three are published in some form: for 1525-26 – N.R. al-Swarieh, *Gaza during the First Half of the Tenth Century (Hegira)/the First Half of the Sixteenth Century (A.D.) – Its Political Administration, Demography and System of Taxation (Timar)* [in Arabic with English abstract], *Jordan Journal for History and Archaeology* 2/3 (2008):82-117; 1548-49 – S. Yalçinkaya, 265 Numaralı Mufassal Tahrir Defterine Göre 1834 Yıllinda Gazze Sancağı (M.A. Thesis, Firat İniveristesı, 2006); and 1596-97 – W.-D. Hütteroth and K. Abdullahtah, *Historical Geography of Palestine, Transjordan and Southern Syria in the Late 16th Century* (Erlanger Geographische Arbeiten, Sonderband 5; Erlangen: Frankischen Geographischen Gesellschaft, 1977). For the nineteenth century, there is an Egyptian census of 1834; the census itself is not extant to my knowledge, but a summary by John Farren (the British Consul-General of Syria) in 1835 exists in the British National Archives and has been published in M. Abir, Local Leadership and Early Reforms in Palestine, 1800-1834, in M. Ma’oz, ed., *Studies on Palestine during the Ottoman Period* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1975), 284-310, at 285 n. 4; and in J. M. Rood, *Sacred Law in the Holy City: The Khedival Challenge to the Ottomans as Seen from Jerusalem, 1829-1841* (The Ottoman Empire and Its Heritage 32. Leiden: Brill, 2004), 142, Table 2. An 1849 Ottoman defter (summarized in a document from the archives of the German Consulate in Jerusalem) was published by A. Schölich, *The Demographic Development of Palestine, 1850-1882*. *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 17 (1985): 485-505, at 491 Table 6. Data from the 1860s are preserved by A. Socin, *Alphabetisches Verzeichniss von Ortschaften des Paschalik Jerusalem*, *ZDPV* 2 (1879):135-163. Finally, there is the Ottoman yearbook for Syria (*Salname-i Vilayet-i Suriye*) of 1871-72; the data for southern Palestine were translated by M. Hartmann, *Die Ortschaftenliste des Liwa Jerusalem in dem türkischen Staatskalender für Syrien auf das Jahr 1288 der Flucht*, *ZDPV* 6 (1883):102-149.} But these more recent developments in scholarship on the Ottoman Empire have not generally been incorporated into work on Ottoman Palestine specifically. If Kark and Levin's chapter merely uses desolation as part of a general overview of the period, other works use desolation in their detailed interaction with primary sources. Perhaps the most important recent study of settlement and geography of Palestine in the nineteenth century is David Grossman’s 2011 *Rural Arab Demography and Early Jewish Settlement in Palestine*.\footnote{D. Grossman, *Rural Arab Demography and Early Jewish Settlement in Palestine: Distribution and Population Density during the Late Ottoman and Early Mandate Periods* (Translated by M. Grossman; New Brunswick, NJ and London: Transaction, 2011)} Grossman, a noted Israeli geographer at Bar-Ilan University, begins
his monograph with a lengthy quote from a report on conditions in the southern coastal plain in 1913. Because this quote has several notable features, I reproduce it in its entirety here:

The road leading from Gaza to the north was only a summer track suitable for transport by camels and carts. . . . In the rainy season it was impassable.

In the villages on both sides of the track . . . no orange groves, orchards or vineyards were to be seen until one reached Yabna Village. Trees generally were a rare sight in these villages. . . . Nor were there any vegetable gardens to be seen in any of these villages except at Jora on the sea (Asqalan). In the Hawakir around the villages—small plots fenced around by cactus hedge—one could find in the winter green onions and in the summer cucumbers and water melons.

In all the villages . . . between Gaza and Jaffa there was only one well in the village and in the smaller villages there were no wells at all. . . . Not in a single village in all this area was water used for irrigation. Water was scantily used for drinking purposes by man and beast.

Houses were all of mud. No windows were anywhere to be seen. The roofs were of caked mud. Every house was divided in two parts—one part slightly elevated above the other. The family lived in the elevated part while in the lower part the cattle were housed. The cattle were small and poor. So were the chickens.

The fields were sown with wheat, barley, kursena and lentils in the winter and with dura and sesame in the summer. Fields used for summer crops one year were sown with winter crops the next year, and so in rotation. The ploughs used were of wood. . . . Not a village could boast of a cart. Sowing was done by hand; harvesting by the scythe and threshing by animals. Fields were never manured.

The lands were all held in musha'a ownership. Every second year the fields were measured by stick and rope and distributed among the cultivators. Division of land always led
to strife and bloodshed.

The yields were very poor. Wheat yield never exceeded 60 kgs per dunum and barley about 100 kgs per dunum. The wheat yield went to the government in payment of the tithe and to the effendi in payment of interest on loans. The fallah himself made his bread from dura.

The sanitary conditions in the villages were horrible. Schools did not exist and the younger generation rolled in the mud of the streets. The rate of infant mortality was very high. There was no medical service in any of the villages distant from a Jewish settlement. In passing a village one noticed a large number of blind, or half-blind persons. Malaria was rampant.34

Among the noteworthy features of this passage, we should first note the source. The actual author and origin of the report are unknown; it was reproduced in the Palestine Royal Commission Report of 1937 (the Peel Commission report), where it is attributed to simply to a “Jewish eyewitness.”35 The anonymous nature of the original source, and its clearly tendentious nature – intended throughout to emphasize the poor condition of villages in the southern coastal plain – raise questions of reliability; and these questions are confirmed by the details of the report itself. For Grossman, the report suggests that “even as late as the second decade of the twentieth century, the condition of the rural Arab population was unsatisfactory.”36 Yet already for the nineteenth century we can see that there are several claims in the report that are demonstrably false.

Besides the Ottoman population data and romantic travel literature, we have for the nineteenth century several detailed, multi-volume surveys conducted by scholars, providing more reliable, quantitative information. Among these, three expeditions are particularly noteworthy: the Americans Edward Robinson and Eli Smith (in 1838 and 1852); the French explorer Victor Guérin (in the 1850s

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and 1860s); and the British Survey of Western Palestine (between 1871 and 1877). The report of an anonymous “Jewish eyewitness” contrasts markedly with the descriptions of villages between Gaza and Yibna in the Survey of Western Palestine Memoirs; I have selected four, ordered from south to north, like the anonymous eyewitness’s itinerary:

Beit Hanun: “A small mud village, surrounded by gardens, with a well to the west. The ground is flat, and to the east is a pond beside the road.”

Deir Suneid: “A moderate-sized mud village with wells, gardens, and a pond.”

Majdal: “The houses are principally of mud, and the water-supply is from several wells and from a large pond to the east of the village. On the same side there is a grove of palms; on the west a large cemetery; and on the north are olives of remarkable size.”

al Maghar: “This village consists almost entirely of mud houses, occupying the south slope of the hill and built in front of caves in the rock. There are fig-gardens beneath, and pasture-land round it on the north and east. The village is not larger than most of those in the plain, but the kokîm tombs at Mûghâir Summeil (see Section B.) show that it is an old site. It has two wells: one north, one west.”

While some of the claims of the anonymous report are largely correct (houses were all of mud, except at the largest villages like Majdal where some were of stone), others are wildly inaccurate. In and

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37 Robinson, Biblical Researches; Robinson, Later Biblical Researches in Palestine and the Adjacent Regions: A Journal of Travels in the Year 1852 (Boston: Crocker and Brewster, 1856); V. Guérin, Description géographique, historique et archéologique de la Palestine (3 parts in 7 vols.; Paris: Imprimerie Impériale, 1868-1880); Conder and Kitchener, Survey of Western Palestine.
38 Conder and Kitchener, Survey of Western Palestine, 3:233.
39 Conder and Kitchener, Survey of Western Palestine, 3:234
40 Conder and Kitchener, Survey of Western Palestine, 2:410-411.
41 Conder and Kitchener, Survey of Western Palestine, 2:411.
around these and other villages (and not just at Jura) one could find gardens, often extensive; several villages had multiple wells; and orchards and groves were fairly common. These features, especially the last, are graphically illustrated on the Survey of Western Palestine map (sheets XVI, XIX, and XX): here we can see the impressive, extensive groves and orchards centered on Majdal, alongside the coastal road (fig. 7).

Despite the problems of source and accuracy, this is the report Grossman chooses as a frame for his entire study. This stark choice characterizes much of the current work on the geography and history of Ottoman Palestine; with scholars like Kark, Levin, and Grossman, we see both current historiography and the relevant primary sources ignored, while the motif of desolation is perpetuated.

Conclusion

Above, I have surveyed the motif of desolation in Palestine as presented in three different imagined geographies: those of nineteenth-century travelers, of early Zionist thinkers, and of current historians and geographers. Clearly the imagined geography of nineteenth-century religious visitors has impacted the others in important ways, although the exact mechanisms of this influence remain to be studied further. For now, I would suggest that the relationship might be extremely complex. For instance, the fact the image of desolation appears to resonate particularly among Jewish scholars today (both in Israel and the Diaspora) may be of significance. It may mean that these historians and geographers initially encountered it in modern iterations of Zionist thought, only to then find it “confirmed” by the nineteenth-century accounts – without any realization that one source was based on the other. Thus, Grossman’s choice of a frame for his study – the anonymous source from the Peel Commission Report – is otherwise circulated largely among non-scholarly, one-sided websites and publications. These include, in an additional level of recursion, evangelical Christian publications.42 In

42 See, e.g., M.G. Bard, Myths and Facts: A Guide to the Arab-Israeli Conflict (Chevy-Chase, MD: American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise, 2002), 11; the work of evangelists Jack Van Impe and Roger Campbell (J. Van Impe and R.F.
fact, Grossman, like these other sources, do not cite the full report from the Peel Commission report, but an abridged version; the ellipses in Grossman’s version mostly coincide with those of the other versions, suggesting that these sources generally did not consult the original anonymous report from the Peel Commission but relied on each other or other secondary or tertiary literature. Meanwhile, Kark and Levin ignore detailed scholarly reports like the Survey of Western Palestine while citing less reliable accounts like Mark Twain’s *The Innocents Abroad* – an even more popular source for non-scholarly advocacy publications. Such connections are highly suggestive for how the web of influences among these different imagined geographies was spun – a fascinating and important episode of the intellectual history of modern scholarship, one that still continues to have a major effect in our understandings of Palestine and the world today.


Fig. 1. Sir Herbert Samuel, British High Commissioner of Palestine, breaking ground at the British excavation of Ashkelon, 1920; the building at the left is a Byzantine church.
Library of Congress LC-M32- 52476-x [P&P], from G. Eric and Edith Matson Photograph Collection
http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/mpc2005001870/PP/
Fig. 2. Maqam el-Khadra, a Muslim shrine at Ashkelon, as it appeared during the British Mandate. Photograph from British Mandate section of Israel Antiquities Authority archives, folder Ascalon I 
Fig. 3. Emmanuel-Guillaume Rey’s plan of Ashkelon based on his 1859 visit to the site; note the “jardins” spread throughout the site.
Fig. 4. Alexander Keith’s illustration of desolation at Ashkelon, 1844: cluster of columns with ruined city walls in the background.

“Engraved by W. Forrest, from Daguerreotype by G.S. Keith.”
Fig. 5. Comte Joseph d’Estourmel’s watercolor of Ashkelon (1833): cluster of columns with ruined city walls in the background.
Fig. 6. A pillar of Zionism: Arthur Ruppin and group at Ashkelon, 1909.
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http://via.lib.harvard.edu/via/deliver/chunkDisplay?_collection=via&inoID=898827&recordNumber=1&startChunkNum=1
&endChunkNum=1&totalChunkCount=1&chunkNumber=1&method=view&image=thumb&offset=0
Fig. 7. Survey of Western Palestine map of Ashkelon region: Note the prevalence of groves and orchards of fruit trees just west of the north-south coastal road and telegraph line, centered on Majdal and extending to the neighboring villages. Survey of Western Palestine map, 1:63,360 (London, 1880), sheets XVI, XIX, and XX; composite made by Todd Bolen, © BiblePlaces.com.