

Some Support, Others Challenge Israel's Claims

By RELIGIOUS NEWS SERVICE

Israel's response on June 18 to the United States' questions about the future of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip has once again spotlighted the highly controversial claim that Israel has a Biblically sanctioned right to the territories.

The Claim falls with special emphasis on the 2,300-square-mile land of rolling hills and valleys that lies between the Jordan River and the coastal plain — the West Bank — which the government of Prime Minister Menachem Begin prefers to identify by its ancient Biblical names, Judea and Samaria.

To its 692,000 Palestinian inhabitants, the Israeli-occupied West Bank is the heartland of what they hope will eventually be an independent Palestinian state.

To the area's 5,000 Jewish settlers, and to thousands of other Israelis, the land is part of Eretz Yisrael (land of Israel) into which Abraham led God's chosen people.

Last December, Prime Minister Begin put forward a 26-point proposal for the occupied territories that would give limited self-rule to the Arabs on domestic matters for five years, with Israel continuing its military control of "security and public order."

In April, the Carter administration put two questions to Israel. They were: Could Israel say that at the end of the five-year period the question of the permanent status of these territories would be resolved? And, what could Israel say about the mechanism by which this question should be resolved?

The Israeli Cabinet response, representing a vote of 14 to 5 — was to defer for five years any decision on the permanent status of the territories.

In a vaguely worded statement, significantly employing the Biblical names, Judea and Samaria, the Cabinet said:

"Five years after the application of the administrative autonomy in Judea and Samaria, and the Gaza District, which will come into force upon the establishment of peace, the nature of the further relations between the parties will be considered and agreed upon, at the suggestion of any of the parties."

The statement was seen as clearly reflecting Begin's long held conviction that Israel had a right to the ancient land of Palestine on the basis of divine promises.

Last February, in a keynote address at an evangelical-sponsored International Congress for the Peace of Jerusalem, Begin told some 800 applauding evangelicals that he was "not ashamed" to base Israel's "right" to Judea and Samaria on "divine promises miraculously being fulfilled, after indescribable Jewish suffering, by supreme heroism not only on the battle field, but also in conquering and greening desert land."

Speakers at the congress, including Dr. G. Douglas Young, founder and director of the Institute of Holy Land Studies in Jerusalem, voiced firm support for Begin's claim.

Other Christians, however, have sharply challenged the Begin claim, as have some Jews both in Israel and in the diaspora.

But prominent evangelicals, not to mention Christian fundamentalists, continue to hail the Israeli occupation of the disputed areas of the Holy Land as a fulfillment of Biblical prophesy.

"We believe," said 15 major American evangelical leaders in a full-page newspaper advertisement, "(that) the rebirth of Israel as a nation and the return of her people to the land is clearly foretold in the Bible and this fulfillment in our time is one of the most momentous events in all human history."

Conceding that "the exact boundaries of the Land of Promise are open to discussion," the signers asserted that "we, along with most Evangelicals, understand the Jewish homeland generally to include the territory west of the Jordan River (Judea and Samaria)."

Says Biblical scholar Shemaryahu Talmon of Jerusalem's Hebrew University: "The Promised Land always includes Judea and Samaria and sometimes even the eastern side of the Jordan River."

Controversy erupted with the publication of the evangelicals' declaration.

An ad hoc ecumenical group, "American Christians for Peace in the Middle East," placed a full-page advertisement in the Washington Post and the Christian Science Monitor roundly condemning such

"simplistic interpretations of the Bible" in regard to the Middle East.

"We are alarmed and distressed," said the group, "by recent attempts on the part of some Western Christians to impose solutions on the problems of the Middle East by employing a few selected verses from the Bible ... to prove that a particular political position on property rights is willed by God."

"It is presumptuous for some Western Christians to seek solutions for the Middle East with a claim to divine insight, disregarding the solutions that millions of Christians in the Middle East are themselves seeking. Eastern Christians who reside where Christianity began also read the Bible."

The ecumenical weekly magazine, The Christian Century, has also taken issue with the evangelical/fundamentalist Scriptural approach to the Middle East problem, insisting that "political decision-making must be shaped by political and not religious guidelines."

"The use of religious validation to settle secular conflicts is a misuse of religion and a disservice to politics," said the journal. "Israel, surrounded by Arab nations that interpret Scripture in quite a different fashion from Jews or Christians, would lean on the weakest possible support if its claim to its 1967 borders were to rest even partially on Scripture."

"The Bible is not a document that sets forth an international game plan," the weekly insisted, adding: "Biblical prophesy anticipates a future of hope for human kind; it does not, however provide an atlas for establishing the geographical boundaries of the countries that seek that hope."

Paul Jersild, chairman of the Department of Religion and Theology, St. Xavier College, Chicago, agrees. "To refer to the Bible in any prescriptive sense in settling (the Israeli claim to Palestine) is an unhistorical and irresponsible use of Scripture," he says.

In a recent address in New York, Rabbi Henry Siegman, executive vice president of the Synagogue Council of America, said that "the claim that the Bible says that God gave Abraham the land in perpetuity is insufficient for political claims today."

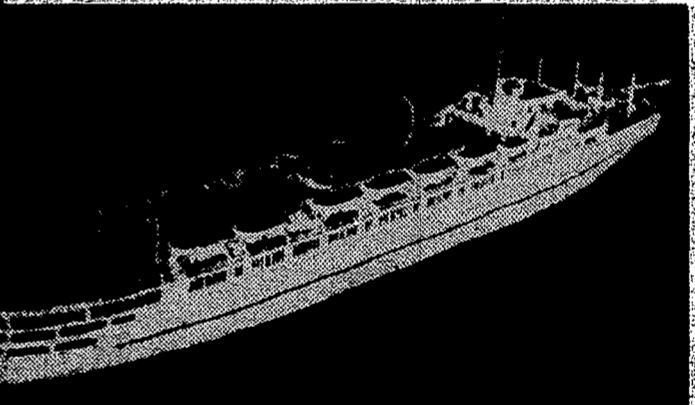
At the same time, however, the distinguished Jewish leader stressed that no one can fully understand Judaism without recognizing "the centrality of the land in the Jewish religious self-understanding."

This "unbroken attachment of Jews to the land, shaped by Biblical promises," he said, "is an historical reality that has concrete implications for secular politics."

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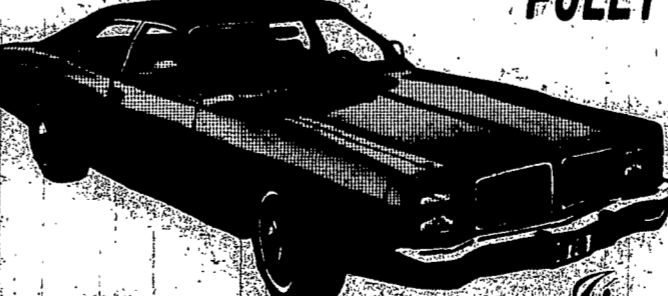
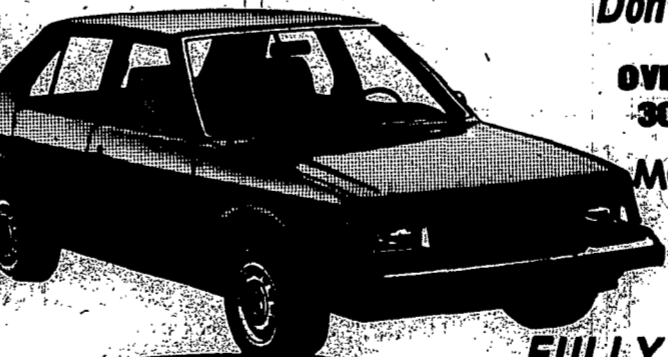
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