

Religious Claims to Palestine: Jews and Muslims

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God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you, that you may become a company of peoples. May he give the blessing of Abraham to you and your descendants with you, that you may take possession of the land where you are living, which God gave to Abraham (GENESIS 28:3-4).

Abraham was not a Jew, nor yet a Christian; but he was an upright man who had surrendered (to God), and he was not of the idolators. Lo! those of mankind who have the best claim to Abraham are those who followed him, and this Prophet and those who believe (with him); and God is the Protecting Friend of the believers (KORAN, SURAH III, 67-68).

Depending on the definition of terms, the Arab-Israeli war is either not a religious war or it is a religious war a dozen times over in a dozen elusive senses. In the remarks that follow we shall review Jewish and Muslim claims not to spiritual privilege or national destiny but, more narrowly, to territory. These territorial claims would become *causa belli* only in the unlikely event that the National Religious Party of Israel and, say, King Feisal of Saudi Arabia were to become the sole voices for, respectively, Israel and "the Arab nation." Short of that, they are a rhetorical and psychological factor in a broader and usually more pragmatic conflict, but as such they are easily overlooked by Christian and secular observers. In describing them we describe an improbable limit-situation which functions as a background to many actual skirmishes, rather as the prospect of a total nuclear war between communism and capitalism functions as a background to many actual skirmishes between the USSR and the USA.

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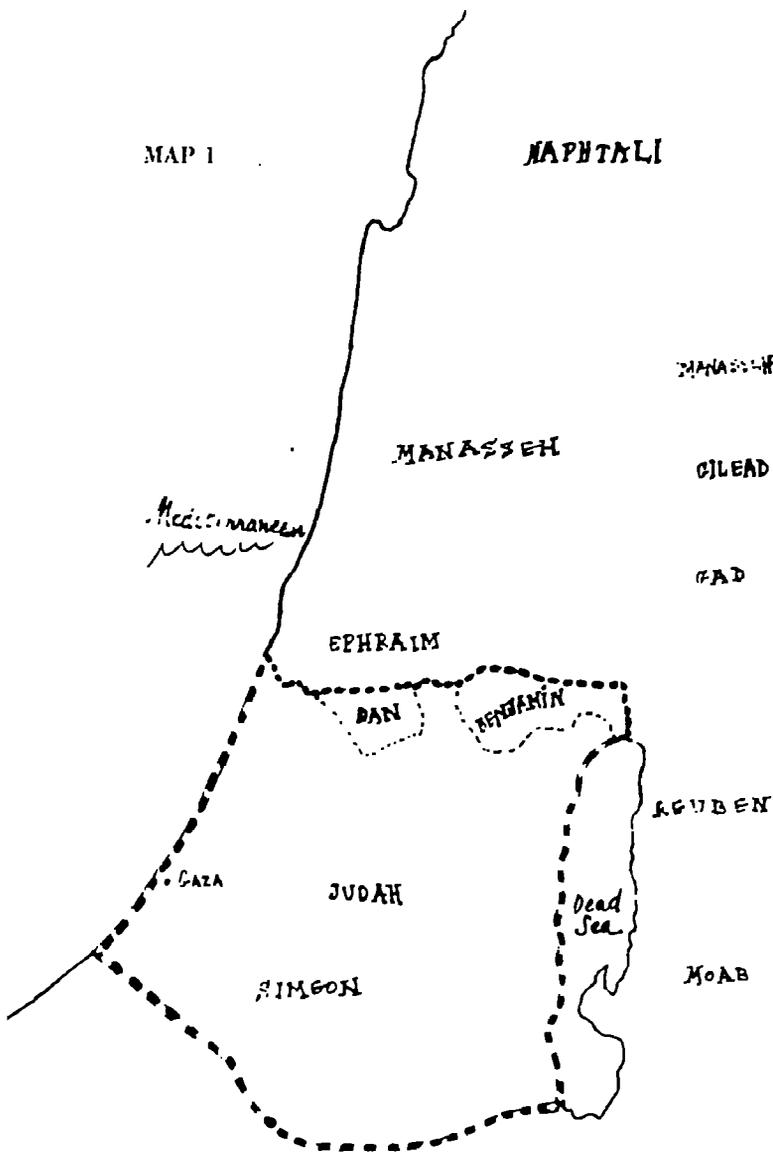
Zion, to begin with Jewish claims, is a biblical synonym for the city of Jerusalem. Whatever else Zionism might capture, it would fail if it failed to hold Jerusalem.

Beyond Jerusalem there is, to begin with, Judea. Biblically the Jews are the sons of Judah, the fourth son of Jacob's (Israel's) wife, Leah. The descendants of the other tribes are lost to history, with the exception of the few hundred surviving Samaritans, who claim descent from Joseph, the first son of Jacob's second wife, Rachel. On the one line of biblical exegesis, then, the biblical homeland of the Jews is the portion of Palestine promised to Judah. According to Joshua 15: 1-4, this is the plot which lies between the Dead Sea and the Mediterranean, as shown on Map 1.

Since, at quite an early date, Dan moved north and Benjamin and Simeon were absorbed by Judah, we may include their territory with that of the Jews. In passing we may note that the Jewish homeland, even this narrowly drawn, does include all of historic Palestine if one takes his stand at that point in the history of the area when "Palestine" still meant the home of the Philistines, the original "Palestinians." The coast-dwelling Palestinians were the first inhabitants of the region to be encountered by Greek traders, and it was the Greeks who gradually extended the designation Palestine to the entire region. The Romans took the designation from them, and Europe took it from the Romans. In the time of Joshua, however (ca. 1200 B.C.), when the tribal boundaries were drawn, nothing more than the Gaza Strip lengthened northward to near modern Tel Aviv could be understood by "Palestine" or any equivalent term.

If the state proclaimed in 1948 by the late David Ben-Gurion called itself Israel rather than Judea it was because the Jews regard themselves as the heirs to the territory promised to the other sons of Jacob as well as to the territory promised to Judah. As noted, Judah was the son of Leah, not the son of

MAP 1



Rachel; and yet Jewish religious literature normally speaks of *rakhel imenu*, "Rachel our Mother." The other tribes are understood to have died intestate, as it were, and the Jews have now assumed their claims. If, however, the Samaritans, as the presumed offspring of Joseph through his sons Ephraim and Manasseh, were more numerous and better financed in the United States, they might lay claim to a biblical homeland with outlines like those in Map 2.

They might indeed, on biblical grounds as plausible as the Jewish, lay claim to everything *except* the territory promised to Judah, Benjamin and Simeon. The grounds for such a Samaritan claim would trace to a schism that occurred after the death of King Solomon in 938 B.C. Before Solomon's death the term "Israel" was used ambiguously to refer either to the population dwelling north of the northern edge of the Dead Sea or to the entire nation. After that time it referred almost exclusively to the northern region, the Kingdom of Israel, as opposed to the Kingdom of Judah. As descendants of the last "Israel" to have had political existence, the Samaritans might well claim prior rights on both the name and the territory. The outlines of their claim are contained on Map 3.

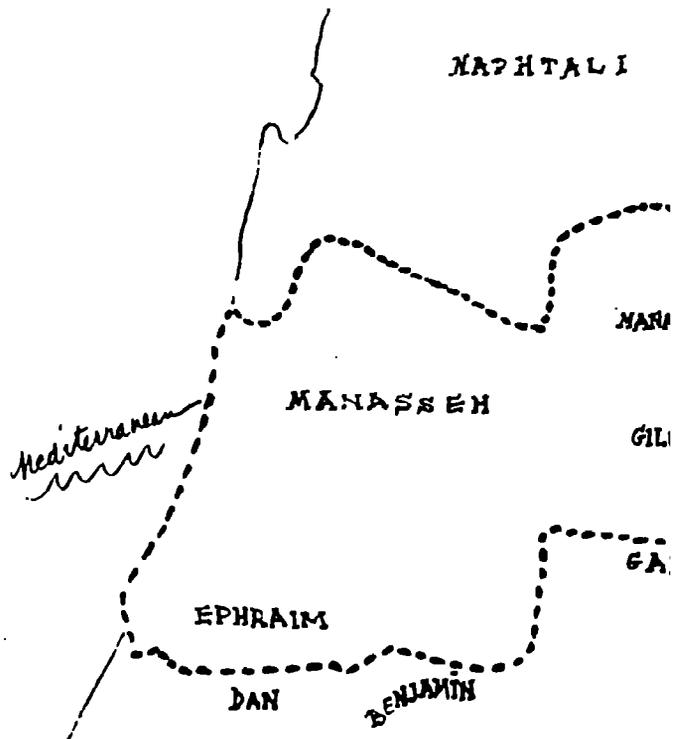
When swatches of Lebanon, Syria and Jordan, as well as the heartland of modern Israel, are, on bibli-

cal grounds, claimed for the tiny company of Samaritans, the secular reader may well cry "This is absurd. The Bible has nothing to do with it. We've got to use common sense." Secular Zionism might agree. Religious Zionism, however, though it may dismiss the Samaritans, cannot do so on the grounds that the Bible has nothing to do with it; they must, rather, emphasize those passages of the Bible which say that the inhabitants of the old northern kingdom sinned in their secession from the south and so forfeited both God's promises and his protection. Thus interpreted, the Samaritans' descent from Rachel is rendered merely physical, and the Jews are justified in their religious or spiritual claim to a twelve-tribe inheritance, which, were they to make it, would have boundaries like those indicated on Map 4.

Toting up the tribal portions, however, is a piecemeal approach to the question of national boundaries. When a people turns toward its past, it turns by preference to its golden age, to the time of its greatest cultural achievement and territorial extent. The Jewish golden age was the reign of David, and Israeli schoolchildren today chant:

*david
melekh yisra'el
chai chai
vekhayyam*

Which, loosely translated, means "King David is alive and well and living in Israel." Now Peruvian schoolchildren sing a song about Tupa Inca, and no one imagines that Peru has designs on Chile or Ecuador. And yet Peru does not have a National Religious Party either, at least not one based on the



MAP 2

Inca religion. For the record then, and without accusing Israel of designs on all the territory indicated, we may note that the border of the Davidic empire stretched from the Wadi el-Arish in Sinai north to Hama, Syria, east to the Euphrates River and back south along the inner edge of the "fertile crescent," as shown on Map 5.

The city of Tyre was an independent enclave within the empire, and there were client states to the north. Much of the eastern border was ill defined. It was simply the shifting line where the fertile crescent gave way to the desert.

David's empire grew up during a brief power vacuum in the Middle East and lasted scarcely two generations. However, biblical traditions from both before and after it are made, by the biblical writers and editors themselves, to conform to it as to the national ideal. Thus in Genesis 15:18 God promises Abraham what David eventually achieved: "To your descendants I give this land, from the brook of Egypt [modern Wadi el-Arish] to the great river, the river Euphrates . . ." Later, as Moses sojourns in Sinai preparing to lead his people northward into the Promised Land, God says (Deuteronomy 11:24): "Every place on which the sole of your feet treads shall be yours; your territory shall be from the wilderness and Lebanon and from the River, the river Euphrates, to the western sea [Mediterranean]."

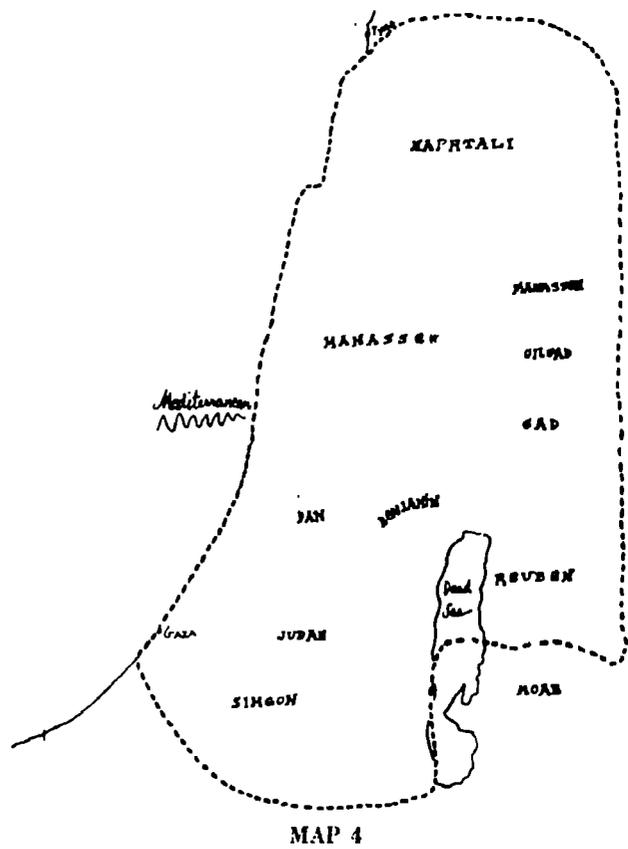
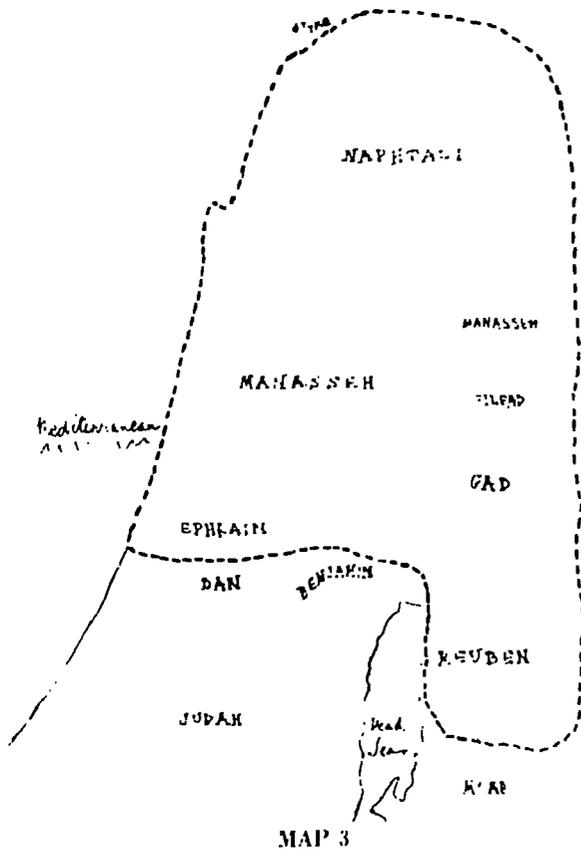
Centuries after the time of David, in Ezekiel's prophetic vision (47: 15-20) of the return from Babylon, the land to which the exiles return has still, anachronistically, the borders of David's empire.

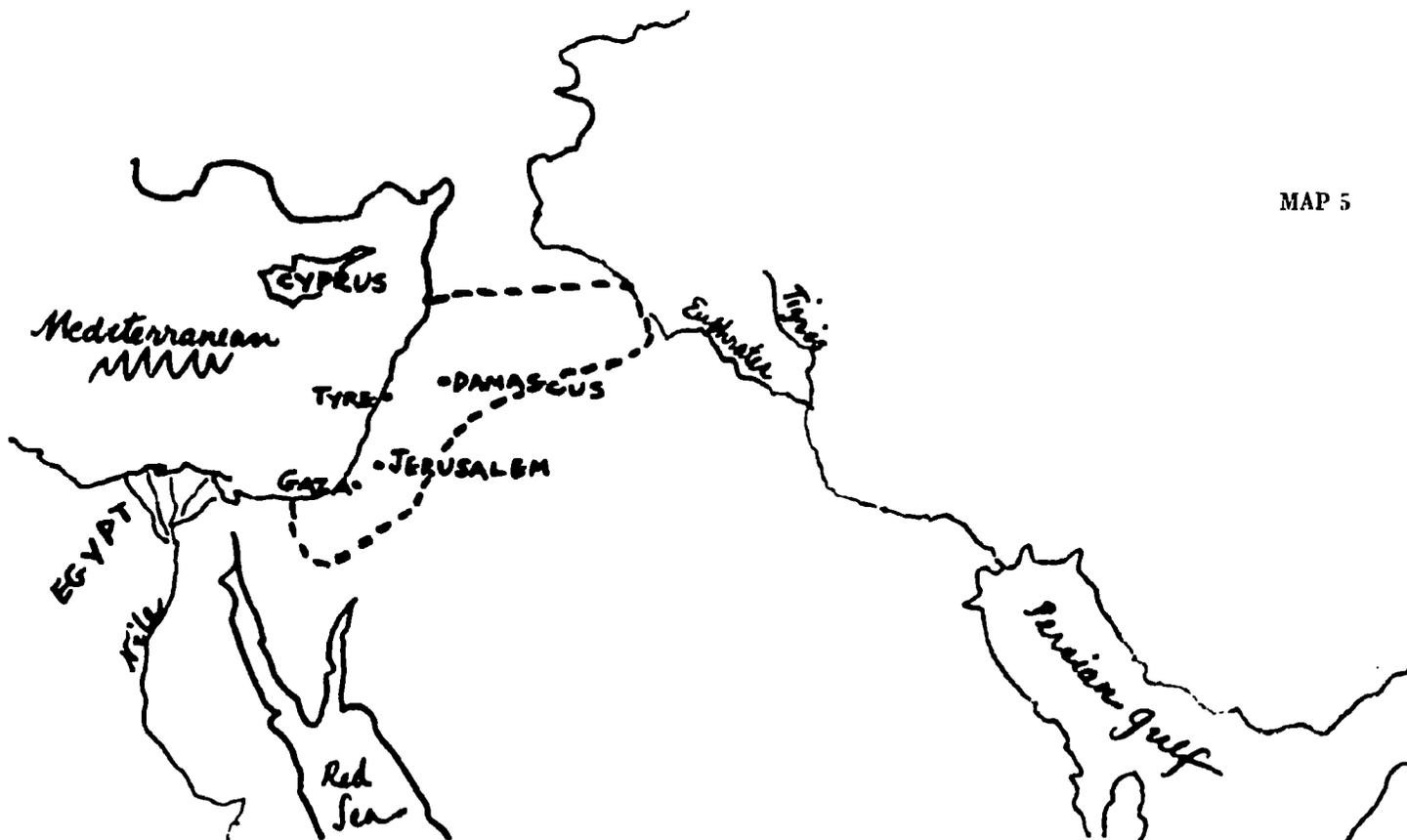
Liberal commentators, especially Christian commentators, are wont to take these unrealistic borders as a literary cue that Ezekiel's vision is poetry and not politics. However, more fundamentalist Christian and Jewish readers of the Bible are often impatient with interpretation which, as they see it, reduces good prose to bad poetry.

The susceptibility of the National Religious Party of Israel to such impatience is not to be presumed, but neither is its immunity to it, nor its willingness to declare any given portion of the Bible inoperative. The region outlined is surely not the "historic Palestine" spoken of at times by the National Religious Party (though, using Roman and later Arab terminology, it could be called "historic Syria"), nor is it in any real sense the biblical homeland of the Jews. However, it is preeminently the biblical Promised Land. It is these borders, in other words, which the Bible most often promises.

Having spoken of the designs which Jews, on purely religious grounds, might have on Arab territory, we may now ask what designs, again on purely religious grounds, Muslims might have on Israeli territory. The answer is simple: On exclusively religious grounds the Muslims can only intend to recapture the land entirely. The State of Israel is an intolerable affront to the religio-political unity of *dar al-islam*, "The House of Islam." As Kenneth Cragg writes in his book of that title:

In and beyond the territorial meaning of the phrase [*dar al-islam*], there belongs a whole socio-





logical and cultural complex, with a bewildering variety of form and temper, yet all somehow self-aware and participating in one identity. The concept is often defined by reference to its antonym, *dar al-Harb*, "the House of non-Islam," "the unpeaced abode," which in the days of *Jihad*, or so-called "holy war," was yet to be brought into conformity and concord with Islam.

One is struck in conversations with Arabs by the frequency with which the image of the house is employed: The Jews are guests who are trying to take over the house, we Arabs do not hate them and in fact have always welcomed them in Arab countries, but when the owner of a house is made to live in a tent while the guest lives in his house and farms his fields. . . . To Western ears the complaint sounds economic. It is not.

From its very inception, from the time when Mohammed fled from Mecca to Medina, not just to preach it but also to assume its civil rule, Islam has been so completely a religio-political unity that the Muslim does not believe that he has the freedom of his religion unless he also exercises political sovereignty. In India since the Raj, in Turkey since Attaturk, in Russia, even in Lebanon, Muslim political sovereignty has been compromised or lost. However, Muslims everywhere retain *dar al-islam* as an ideal, and in the Arab heartland, its inner chambers, largely achieve it.

Palestine, it cannot be insisted too often, is one of those inner chambers, at least as Muslims view the house. The Christian West is aware that Judaism began with a victory over Egypt. It is less aware that Islam, in many ways, began with a victory over Israel. Most of Mohammed's important victories in

the unification of Arabia were victories over Jewish tribes which had settled in Arabia and dominated its commerce at the time he began his preaching. More important, in the great *jihad* which followed his death, the very first victory was the victory over Palestine. Islam was born in 622 A.D.

Palestine became Muslim in 636 A.D. and—leaving aside the interlude of Crusader rule—remained so for 1,300 years. Given that Transjordan only appears when one looks through the western end of the telescope, that from the eastern end there is only Cisjordan, or, more simply, northwest Arabia, Palestine is that chamber within *dar al-islam* which opens upon the sanctuary itself. That Jerusalem, from which the Prophet took flight for heaven, should be definitively transferred to the hands of the infidel is an abomination not to be contemplated.

The Muslim attitude toward de facto Jewish occupation of the land is exactly parallel to, and in fact ultimately modeled on, the biblical attitude toward the tribes that the Israelites expelled or conquered when they occupied the land for the first time. As we read in the Book of Joshua (24:2, 11-13):

Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: . . . you went over the Jordan and came to Jericho, and the men of Jericho fought against you, and also the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites; and I gave them into your hand. And I sent the hornet before you, which drove them out, before you, the two kings of the Amorites; it was not by your sword or by your bow. I gave you a land on which you had not labored, and cities which you had not built, and you dwell

therein; you eat the fruit of vineyards and olive-yards which you did not plant.

The Promised Land was, in other words, not flowing with milk and honey because it was rich in wild goats and honeybees. It was a populated, cultivated land which God chose to take from those who had populated and cultivated it and to give to the sons of Israel. Man may not effect such expropriations of his own volition. The text makes that point indirectly ("not by your sword or by your bow"), and other texts make the same point directly. However, lands and men belong alike to the Lord. What might be wrong for man is not wrong for Him. Just as, because of His power, the question of defeat does not arise, so, because of His justice, the question of sin does not arise.

It was by a holy war, then, that the national religion of Israel was launched, and by a similar holy war that the international religion of *dar al-islam* was launched, a war that if successful would have drawn the whole world into the sort of fusion of religion and national culture which the European world knows only in its smaller, compromised Jewish prototype. The lands which then fell to Muslim armies did not, as Muslims see it, fall to the Muslim sword and bow but rather, as Jericho before Joshua's trumpet, to the will of God. Since Palestine was one of those lands, God evidently wishes Muslims to rule Palestine.

Jews may respond to Muslim claims of this sort by declaring them false, as Islam is a false religion. In that case, the Arab-Israeli war becomes, clearly, a religious war. Alternatively, the Jews may say that territorial claims based on religion have no standing in modern negotiations, in which case the Jewish religious claim to Palestine is itself vacated; for the rule of thumb in *Realpolitik* is that territory belongs to the *last* effective claimant, not to the first. Thus Silesia goes to Poland, Latvia to Russia, Ulster to England and Puerto Rico to the United States.

When all claims are secular, they can only be adjudicated, when reason fails, by sword and bow. But if the Jews have rights in Palestine, that would not be destroyed even if every Israeli were drowned in the Mediterranean; if the biblical promise means anything, then there is such a thing as a spiritual claim; and if there is, then spiritual claims from Muslim premises must also be allowed their force. The premises of Zionism, in short, are the premises of *dar al-islam* writ earlier and writ small.

Muslims understand themselves to worship the same God whom the Jews worship, and they revere the Scriptures which promise Palestine to the Jews. They resolve the contradiction implicit in this reverence by a device already discussed; namely, by referring the biblical promises to themselves. Not only, they argue, are the Arabs the physical descendants of Abraham through Ishmael, but all Muslims are Abraham's spiritual descendants, inasmuch as when he submitted (*aslama*) to God's demand that he sacrifice Ishmael (Isaac in the Jewish version), he became the spiritual ancestor of all who have submitted, of all Muslims. Abraham was the first Muslim, then, and Muslims are his true offspring, the true heirs of all that God promised him.

The Muslim attitude toward Jewish claims is like the Jewish attitude toward Samaritan claims. Just as the Jews can claim Rachel as their spiritual mother, since, though they are the sons of Leah, it is they alone who have been faithful to the God who opened Rachel's womb, so the Arabs, the sons of Abraham and Hagar, can in effect claim Sara, out of whom Abraham fathered the Jews, as their spiritual mother, since it is they alone who like Abraham have submitted to God. And just as the Jews claim the inheritance of Rachel's offspring (the Samaritans), so the Muslims may claim all the territory which Sara's offspring (the Jews) would otherwise have inherited.

The details of the argument are unimportant. Its essence is that to Pat Boone's crooning, "This Land is mine/God gave this Land to me," Muslims feel empowered to add a verse: "And then he gave it to me."

There seems to be no way out of the dilemma. To concede the religious legitimacy after 636 of a lasting Jewish claim to political sovereignty over Palestine would be, for Muslims, to concede that their first *jihad* was not really the work of God. In equivalent Jewish terms, this would be to demythologize Passover. On the other hand, religious Jews, in order to concede the legitimacy of permanent Muslim sovereignty over Palestine, would have to deny the fidelity of God to the biblical promises.

That there may be spiritual vectors within both religious traditions leading away from sacralized territorial claims is not to be denied, but that is not the subject of this article. Similarly, that the progress and resolution of the war may respond more to pragmatic considerations than to religion has already been conceded. To the extent, however, that religious claims to territory do affect the ongoing conflict, the claims are approximately those just indicated.