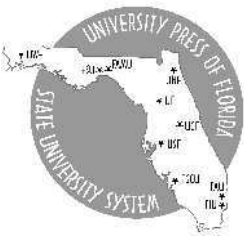# America's Palestine: Popular and Official Perceptions from Balfour to Israeli Statehood

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America's Palestine

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Our Palestine

The nineteenth century, and a good part of the twentieth, constituted an age of empire. About the year 1870, the European powers increased the pace of imperial expansion until they had captured most of the non-Western world. The United States also participated in this imperial race for territory.

The Basis of America's Perception of Palestine

The cultural and political views that supported imperialism can be understood in terms of a prevailing paradigm of the time that divided the world in a bipolar fashion. The world was divided into two parts—the civilized West, possessed of technological know-how and representing progress, efficiency, and good government; and the backward East, in need of "development" and guidance. Within this perceptual framework the spread of Western civilization was considered both inevitable and beneficial. Imperialism thus became altruistic.

> Take up the White Man's burden
> Send forth the best ye breed
> Go bind your sons to exile
> To serve your captive's needs;
> To wait in heavy harness,
> On fluttered fold and wild
> Your new caught, sullen peoples,
> Half devil and half child.

A good number of Americans would have agreed with Rudyard Kipling's words in this famous 1899 poem. They had adopted its sentiments to rationalize their expansion across the American continent and beyond to such American colonial possessions as the Philippine Islands, Hawaii, and Puerto Rico.[1] As with their European cousins, the bipolar

worldview and its corollary of altruistic imperialism shaped their views of the non-Western world.

There was a second corollary to the bipolar worldview paradigm, and this had to do with religion. Not only was the civilized West in possession of superior technology and all the physical accoutrements of progress that it brought. It was also in possession of an alleged superior religion—Christianity. Here the notion that the West had a duty to bring the primitive East progress in the form of good government and the hardware of high civilization was melded to the proselytizing zeal of the Protestant Christian missionary.[2] Americans also felt this zeal and went abroad to bring the "word of God to the heathen."

American popular perceptions of Palestine were shaped by these paradigmatic forces. Palestine had always been a special place for both American Christians and Jews, owing to its biblical associations. Yet this religious identification was also understood within the context of the bipolar worldview. Palestine, being the birthplace of Jesus and the ancient homeland of the Jews, had, for a long time, been lost within the sphere of the primitive and "pagan" East. By the early nineteenth century, there was a feeling in the United States that the time had now come when this place, which was of the utmost spiritual importance to the Christian West, had to be redeemed, both spiritually and developmentally, by the work of American Protestant missionaries.

The nineteenth century was a particularly propitious time for this sort of outlook. America had been undergoing a religious revival in the Second Great Awakening.[3] Particularly swept up in this century-long religious revival were the New England Protestant churches: Presbyterian, Congregationalist, and the like, as well as their affiliated seminaries and colleges, such as Harvard, Yale, Williams, Amherst, and Andover. Here we find many young men dedicating themselves to a missionary profession the aim of which was to "morally renovate the world." What that translated into was an effort to "Christianize the world in one generation" or, in any case, before the turn of the century.[4]

Behind this American missionary effort to Christianize and morally renovate not only the peoples of the Near East and Palestine, but various other unenlightened folks on the far side of the bipolar divide, was a series of assumptions. These went beyond the missionary community and were shared by believing Protestants generally. They were that there was one true religion and Protestant Christians were in possession of it; that such possession brought with it an obligation to spread the "word" to the unenlightened; and that spreading the word constituted a divinely sanc-

tioned mission on the success of which depended the salvation of the world.[5]

This effort at saving the world through Protestant evangelical proselytizing was then married, by these New England crusaders, to the notion of American manifest destiny. This latter outlook was seen as having the concomitant assumptions that the political and economic systems of the United States represented the greatest achievements of mankind and had created a superior civilization; this superior American civilization was God-blessed; those who represent this superior civilization have an obligation to expand it for the sake of mankind (as they were doing across America's western frontier); and this effort to expand American ways was also sanctified by God.

And so one has the coming together of two gospels, the Protestant and the American.[6] One can hear the melding of these two worldviews in the sermon, given to a gathering of supporters of American missions abroad, by the Reverend John Codman in Boston in 1836. "How can we better testify our appreciation of [America's] free institutions, than by laboring to plant them in other lands? For where the Gospel goes in its purity and power, there will follow in its train the blessings of civilization, liberty and good government. . . . Coming himself from a land of freedom, he [the missionary] will naturally spread around him an atmosphere of liberty."[7]

That this whole point of view ignored a multitude of sins on the part of American civilization (that, for instance, Codman made his speech in a country that stood as the last major Western nation to maintain slavery as a legal institution) did not make it any any less effective. As the century wore on, Americans would ignore their own shortcomings, and, following Codman's lead, use the need to Christianize and Americanize the natives as a single rationalization for becoming an imperialist power in their own right.[8] By the end of the century many Americans could blithely criticize European imperialist methods while categorizing American control of the Philippines and other colonies as a service to mankind. The same attitude would be affixed to their missionary efforts in the Muslim world. As one Congregationalist minister put it after returning from a trip to the Near East, "America is God's last dispensation towards the world."[9]

The American Missionary Effort in the Near East

The origins of the Protestant evangelical missionary movement can be found in New England and especially at the Andover Theological Seminary in Massachusetts. There, about 1810, a fraternity was formed the

members of which pledged themselves to become missionaries abroad. Over the next one hundred years some 250 young men would choose such a career as part of this effort. Out of this enterprise also came the formation of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, founded in 1810. The American Board (or ABCFM) served as a steering committee for this missionary effort, setting its goals and seeking the necessary funds. Spurred on by religious and patriotic convictions, it would turn out to be a successful and long-lived enterprise.

The ABCFM sent out its first missionaries to the Near East in 1819 reportedly with "a pledge of full protection from Secretary of State John Quincy Adams."[10] These men, two recent graduates of Andover, were instructed to learn the local languages, distribute Bibles and other religious tracts, and discreetly instruct in the Gospel, avoiding offense to local laws and customs.[11] Over time this missionary effort became headquartered at Beirut and spread out from there into Anatolia, Syria, Palestine, and beyond.

By 1900 there would be more Americans—mostly missionaries—in the Near East than any other Western nationality except the British. And while they spread the Gospel to the locals, often in a more zealous fashion than their early instructions called for, they simultaneously furnished Americans back home with their principal source of information and misinformation on contemporary Palestine.[12] As Edward Earle, professor of history at Columbia University and one of the first researchers of the American missionary enterprise, put it in the April 1929 issue of *Foreign Affairs,* "For almost a century American public opinion concerning the Near East was formed by the missionaries. If American opinion has been uninformed, misinformed and prejudiced, the missionaries are largely to blame. Interpreting history in terms of the advance of Christianity, they have given an inadequate, distorted, and occasionally a grotesque picture of Moslems and Islam."[13]

In the nineteenth century, Americans knew almost nothing about the actual Palestine and its Muslim-majority population, both of which were then part of the Ottoman Empire.[14] However, they knew a great deal about a romanticized and theocratized version of that land. They drew this version from a combination of Bible study (the Bible was assumed to relate historical fact), romantic fiction, and the occasional travelogue. As Fuad Sha'ban has shown in his work, *Islam and Arabs in Early American Thought,* for all intents and purposes a mythical Palestine, constructed in terms of Judeo-Christian theology, had displaced the real Palestine in the consciousness of Americans.[15] What the missionaries now added in terms

of lecture tours, newsletters, and their own published diaries and accounts fit completely into this standard, theocratized version governing Western perception of the Holy Land.

The assumptions underlying the theocratized picture of Palestine went like this: Palestine was the land of the Bible, the birthplace of Jesus and the ancient homeland of the Jews. This meant that it was a Judeo-Christian place, which, in the modern age, really made it an important extension of the West. That it was geographically located beyond the borders of Western civilization lent it an exotic air, but was ultimately secondary to the fact that, religiously, it was as important to the West as Rome, Canterbury, or the Puritan meeting hall. Unfortunately, in the dim past this sacred place had been captured by infidel hordes and ruled ever since by despoiling "Mohammedans." Thus the "land of milk and honey" had been turned into a "land of dust."

News of—as the missionary Eli Smith put it—"the misery of the present scene"[16] only produced shock and dismay that the Palestine described by Western visitors fell so short of the idealized biblical picture. Protestant missionary work, therefore, was portrayed and accepted as part of an effort to redeem this holy place, to reclaim it by converting its occupants to the true religion and a better societal model that were both essentially Western and American. In relaying back information to the public, the American missionaries, steeped in these assumptions, only reinforced the demand that the real Palestine become a modernized version of the biblical holy land.

Religiously defined assumptions were not the only factors influencing American missionary behavior. Coming from a culture that separated church and state, and made religion a personal choice, the first generation of missionaries were ignorant of, and unprepared to work in, a culture that divided itself into "millets," or religiously defined communities. In the Ottoman Empire the religion of your birth affixed you to a residential community that was more or less self-contained. Minority groups, such as the Greek Orthodox, Catholics, Coptic Christians, and Jews, among others, lived within their own communal enclaves and were governed by their own religious and lay leaders, laws, and courts. As long as they paid their taxes and made no trouble they were usually left alone by the Muslim majority. It was a rare thing that one abandoned one's religion, for to do so meant abandoning one's family and community. For Muslims this could be a dangerous move in that apostasy was one of the few acts that carried a death penalty under Sharia law (Muslim holy law).

It seems that the early American missionaries knew nothing of this and,