



# The Critique of Zionism: The Fiction of Chosen People of God and the Promised Land, and the Occupation of Palestine

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### Abstract

This article explores the historical, religious, and political foundations of Zionism and its impact on the ongoing occupation of Palestine. Originating in the late 19th century, Zionism initially began as a secular movement driven by the nationalist ideologies of Europe, advocating for a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Over time, however, it became intertwined with religious beliefs, particularly the Jewish concept of the "Chosen People" and the "Promised Land," both of which form the ideological bedrock of Zionism. The article traces the origins of these doctrines, rooted in biblical narratives, and examines how they contributed to the idea of Jewish return to Palestine, a concept long shared by Christian eschatological movements as well. The religious foundation of Zionism is critically assessed, especially in light of the historical exclusionary narratives that have marginalized Arabs, particularly Palestinians, by framing them as descendants of biblical enemies. The article also discusses the British role in facilitating the Zionist project, through both political and economic motivations, alongside religious and eschatological factors, particularly among Christian Zionists. By examining these interconnected factors—Jewish religious claims, Christian support, and Western imperial interests—the article highlights how the occupation of Palestine is justified both through political and religious ideologies, with far-reaching implications for the ongoing conflict in the region.

**Keywords:** Zionism, Occupation of Palestine, Promised Land, Chosen People.

## Siyonizm Eleştirisi: Tanrı'nın Seçilmiş Halkı ve Vaat Edilmiş Topraklar Kurgusu ve Filistin'in İşgali

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### Öz

Bu makale Siyonizm'in tarihi, dini ve siyasi temellerini ve Filistin'deki işgal üzerindeki etkisini incelemektedir. 19. yüzyılın sonlarında ortaya çıkan Siyonizm, başlangıçta Avrupa'nın milliyetçi ideolojileri tarafından yönlendirilen ve Filistin'de bir Yahudi anavatanını savunan seküler bir hareket olarak belirmiştir. Ancak zamanla dini inançlarla, özellikle de Siyonizm'in ideolojik temelini oluşturan Yahudilerin "Seçilmiş Halk" ve "Vaat Edilmiş Topraklar" kavramlarıyla iç içe geçmiştir. Bu makale, Kitab-ı Mukaddes'teki anlatılara dayanan bu doktrinlerin kökenlerinin izini sürmekte ve uzun süredir Hıristiyan eskatolojik hareketler tarafından da paylaşılan bir kavram olan "Yahudilerin Filistin'e dönüşü" fikrine nasıl katkıda bulduklarını incelemektedir. Siyonizm'in dini temeli, özellikle Araçları ve bilhassa Filistinlileri Tanah pasajlarındaki İsrailoğullarının düşmanlarının torunları olarak çerçeveleyerek ötekileştiren tarihsel dışlayıcı anlatılar ışığında eleştirel bir şekilde değerlendirilmektedir. Makalede ayrıca, özellikle Hıristiyan Siyonistler arasında dini ve eskatolojik faktörlerin yanı sıra hem siyasi hem de ekonomik motivasyonlar yoluyla Siyonist projenin kolaylaştırılmasında İngilizlerin rolü de tartışılmaktadır. Birbirine bağlantılı bu faktörleri -Yahudi dini iddiaları, Hıristiyan desteği ve Batı'nın emperyal çıkarları- inceleyen makale, Filistin'in işgalinin hem siyasi hem de dini ideolojiler aracılığıyla nasıl meşrulaştırıldığını ele almakta ve bunun bölgede devam eden çatışma üzerinde geniş kapsamlı etkileri olduğunu vurgulamaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Siyonizm, Filistin'in işgali, Vaat edilmiş topraklar, Seçilmiş halk.

This special issue of *Milel ve Nihal* deals with the emergence of Zionism, its background, and the problems caused by the Zionist occupation in Palestine today. I would like to thank Abdullah Maruf Ömer from Istanbul 29 Mayıs University for editing this special issue.

It is well known that Zionism emerged in the late 19th century as a secular movement initially influenced by the trend of nation-state ideology in Europe with the ideology of creating a homeland in Palestine for the Jews living in the Diaspora. This secular movement was later transformed into a movement using predominantly such religious arguments as the promised land and the Jews as the chosen people of God. It is also known that the idea of the return of the Jews to Palestine is not exclusive to the Jews, as there have long been advocates of this among the Christians as well. As a matter of fact, the idea of the return of the Jews to Palestine has been kept on the agenda by various Christian movements as part of their eschatological expectations concerning the doctrine of Parousia since at least the 18th century. That is why those so-called Christian Zionists are wholeheartedly supporters of the idea of restoration of Jewish sovereignty in Palestine and therefore the occupation of Palestine.

The doctrine that the Jews, identified with the Israelites are the Chosen People and the idea of the Promised Land for this chosen people are the main religious basis of Zionism. Judaism with its ethnocentric characteristics accordingly makes a reading of history centered on the ethnic identity of the Israelites; it identifies the ethnic identity of the Israelites with Judaism and places the perception of the Israelites as the chosen people at the very center of the historical process. Accordingly, all of history is the process of the covenant regarding the election of the Israelites, the preparation of humanity for the reality of this election, and the fulfilment of the promise of election.

The Jewish tradition holds that God, through Abraham, made a special covenant with the Israelites, who are defined as ‘His own people’ (Genesis 17:5-10). The essence of the message contained in this divine covenant with Abraham and his descendants is not to have other gods and not to worship idols. According to Jewish belief, two issues come to the fore in this covenant with Abraham: The chosenness of the Israelites as an ethnic identity, their privilege from other peoples in the eyes of God, and the land promised to this chosen people by God.

According to Jewish scripture, God will continue His covenant with Abraham and his descendants from the time of Abraham. However, this covenant will not be continued with everyone born to Abraham, but with Isaac. By saying, ‘Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac ... with him and with his seed I will keep my covenant forever’ (Genesis 17:19), God has indicated that this promise does not include all the descendants of Abraham, the ‘father of nations’, but only the descendants of Isaac. That is why Ishmael, who is characterized as a son of Abraham but born of a slave woman, and his descendants are excluded from this covenant. Similarly, not everyone born to Isaac is subject to the covenant; among Isaac’s children, the covenant will be maintained only with Jacob. Esau, Isaac’s other son and Jacob’s twin brother, is also outside this covenant. Although Esau was born before his twin brother Jacob, the covenant will not be maintained through him, but through Jacob, who will later be named Israel. Jewish tradition emphasizes that Esau sold his firstborn sonship to Jacob in exchange for a loaf of bread and pottage of lentils (Genesis 25:29-34), thus excluding Esau, Jacob’s twin brother who was born before him, from this promise (Genesis 27:35-38). According to the Jewish tradition, with Jacob, the covenant

God had heralded to the descendants of Abraham came into being with the Israelites. Thus, a new era in human history began with Jacob and his sons, a phase in which God's chosen people appeared on the history stage.

As will be noted here, in the context of the doctrine of the Israelite ethnicity as a chosen nation, a holy lineage is constructed from the sons of Jacob to Abraham, and people such as Ishmael, the eldest son of Abraham, and Esau, the eldest son of Isaac, who are seen as contrary to this lineage, are excluded. Moreover, they are identified as the ancestors of peoples such as the Arabs and Amalekites, who have historically been labeled as opponents and enemies of the Israelites. It is worth bearing in mind here the statements calling for the massacre of the Amalekites in the Book of Samuel (1 Samuel 15:3) and the theopolitics of the Israeli Prime Minister legitimizing the massacre of the Palestinians by labeling them as Amalekites.

The marginalization of the historical opponents and enemies of the divinely chosen lineage is not limited to those considered outside the divine covenant in the lineage from Jacob to Abraham. A similar approach applies to the children of Noah, who is considered the second ancestor of humanity. The Israelites are thought to be descended from Sam (Shem), one of the sons of Noah, while the Canaanites, the historical enemies of the Israelites, are believed to be the descendants of Ham, another son of Noah. The superiority of Noah's son Sam over Ham is based on an origin myth. According to this myth, when his father Noah got drunk and walked around naked, Ham laughed at him, while Sam and his brother Japhet covered his father and tried to protect him from this shame (Genesis 9: 20-22). Because of this, Canaan, the ancestor of the Canaanites, one of the historical enemies of the Israelites, was punished by God for being a servant to his brothers (Genesis 9: 25-26). All of this has been evaluated in the context of the historical background to the teaching about the difference and superiority of the Israelites as God's chosen people. While the Israelites and their descendants are glorified and blessed, the peoples and their descendants, who are described as historical opponents or enemies of the Israelites, are almost 'demonized' and marginalized.

In Jewish scripture, the Israelites are described as 'God's own people,' 'a holy people' (Deuteronomy 7:6, 14:1-2), 'the Son of God', and 'the firstborn of God' (Hosea 11:1, Exodus 4:22-23). Their position is emphasized as superior and privileged over all other peoples (Leviticus 20:26, Deuteronomy 26:19).

According to the Jewish belief, God promised the holy land (*eretz ha kodesh*) to this chosen people in the context of His covenant with Abraham, saying 'I will give to you and your descendants the land where you lived as a stranger, the whole land of Canaan, to be your possession forever. I will be their God' (Genesis 17:8). The land promised to the Israelites as the chosen people is also clearly stated.

"To your descendants, I will give this land from the river of Egypt to the great river Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaims, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites." (Genesis 15:18-21).

Accordingly, Abraham, who originally settled in Ur in the land of Aram in Southern Mesopotamia, and his chosen descendants are promised the lands from Egypt to the Euphrates, where many peoples from Canaanites to Perizzites, from Hittites to Jebusites live.

This doctrine of the chosen people of God and the land promised to this chosen nation has occupied an important place in the Jewish mindset throughout history. As a matter of

fact, in the context of current events, it is known that various Jewish clergymen and politicians from time to time refer to it in one way or another. The following problem naturally draws attention here: Why did God choose the Israelites as His 'own people' or 'son of God' and no other ethnic identities or other peoples, and why did He promise the lands of the Philistines, Hittites, Canaanites and similar peoples who had been living in this region for generations between Egypt and the Euphrates to a people who were originally strangers here, the Israelites, the descendants of Abraham? Does this conform to divine justice?

The Jewish mindset has a clear answer to these questions. First of all, the Jewish tradition believes that since the first man Adam, God has made various covenants with humanity in general in the person of Adam and Noah, but that humanity has failed, so to speak, in terms of the promises made to God in these covenants. Accordingly, God finally made a covenant with Abraham and his descendants, the Israelites, who responded positively to God's covenant. Thus, these people who responded positively to the divine covenant were distinguished as "chosen people". As for the holy land promised to God's chosen people, Judaism believes that the peoples living in this land, both by adopting other gods and becoming idolaters, and by being descended from people known for their negative character, who were not deemed suitable for the divine promise in terms of origin and lineage, did not actually have a right to this land, and therefore it was decided by the divine will that this land belonged to the Israelites, that is, the Jews. In line with the legitimization of this idea, the Jewish tradition emphasizes many narratives about the negative character of these peoples and the ancestors from whom these nations descended.

As a matter of fact, many narratives about the origin and negative character of these peoples, such as the divine decree that the Canaanites should be slaves to their brothers (Genesis 9:25-26), and that the Moabites and Ammonites are a wild and cruel generation derived from the incestuous relationship between Prophet Lot and his daughters (Genesis 19:30-38, Judges 3:11, 28), are included in the Jewish sacred text.

It is discussed that such doctrines as the belief that the Israelites are the chosen people of God and the conception of the promised land to this chosen people have emerged in times of social and political trauma and chaos in the history of the Israelites. The period of the Babylonian exile in particular led to many inquiries into the painful experiences of the Israelite nation. It is known that a policy based on an ethnic identity-centered understanding of religion was put into effect among the Jews returning from exile by 'Ezra the scribe' in the post-exile period, and in this direction, marriages outside the Israelite ethnicity were prohibited among the Jews. The Babylonian king Nabuchadnezzar's destruction of the state of Judah, Jerusalem, and the temple and the forced exile of a significant part of the people in Babylon caused serious trauma among the Jews. The Jews who experienced this catastrophe and exile asked themselves why this happened and why they were punished by God in this way. From the actions of Ezra at the end of the exile, it is understood that the Jewish clergy answered this question as the disruption of the ethnicity of the Israelites through ethnic and cultural exchange and intermarriage with other the peoples of the region. Thus, in terms of the divine promise, an idea of ethnic identity-centered chosenness has been placed at the centre of the Jewish mindset and a sacred history narrative has been constructed retrospectively in the Jewish sacred text in the context of legitimizing such doctrine of the chosen nation. Accordingly, in the Jewish tradition, the doctrine of the Israelites as the

chosen people and the holy land promised to this chosen nation has been tried to be legitimized by a sacred myth of lineage and history constructed retrospectively.

This understanding of the idea of ethnically chosen people of God and the promised land in Judaism has been one of the main pillars of Zionism. The idea of creating a state for Jews in the Holy Land was the main motivation for Zionism. In this way, Jews living in the diaspora would have a nation-state and the Jewish problem in Europe would be solved, as one of Theodor Herzl's articles was titled, "A Solution of the Jewish Question". Accordingly, the main agenda item of the early Zionist congresses organized from 1892 onwards was how to create this Jewish state. It is known that a series of developments, including the establishment of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, took place in the context of laying the groundwork for this project, and finally, the British foreign minister of the time, Arthur Belfour, promised Rothschild 'a national homeland for the Jews in Palestine' with a declaration dated 2 November 1917 in the context of 'sympathy for the Zionist aspirations of the Jews', and in the same year, the British occupied Palestine and prepared the environment that enabled the encouragement of Jewish immigration and the de facto establishment of Israel in time.

Undoubtedly, there are various political, military, and economic reasons why the British promised a state to the Jews in Palestine and subsequently occupied Palestine. These reasons include controlling the waterways, especially the Suez, and the underground resources in the region, and designing the region in line with their interests after the First World War. However, it is also a fact that encouraging the immigration of Jews to Palestine through an occupation to be established in Palestine is important both in terms of the solution of the Jewish issue, which has long been seen as a problem in the Christian West, and in terms of eschatological expectations in the Christian tradition.

First of all, such an endeavor was considered important for the solution of the problem of Jews living in Christian Western countries, which has caused outrage in society since the Middle Ages. There is a 'Jewish problem' in the Christian West; there is a serious discomfort caused by Jews and anti-Semitism, which is a manifestation of this problem. As a matter of fact, as mentioned above, Theodor Herzl, whose name is associated with Jewish Zionism, was aware of this problem. Herzl emphasized an existing Jewish problem and tried to find a solution to it. Indeed, the Jews, with their unassimilated nature and their generally introverted, protective ghetto life, have always been seen as a thorn in the side of Christian peoples and have been persecuted from time to time, as was the case in England in the 13th century and the Iberian Peninsula in the 15th century. Religious leaders such as Martin Luther, one of the pioneers of Protestant Christianity, incited the public against Jews through their writings and sermons. In this context, various accusations such as 'blood libel' were made against Jews in the Middle Ages and later. Considering all these, the British promise to establish a state for the Jews in Palestine is like a solution to this 'Jewish problem' in Christian Europe.

Aside from this, there is a significant segment of the Christian tradition that believes that the return of the Jews to the holy land promised to them in the holy book is important for the eschatological expectation of Christianity. Some Christian groups, especially in line with the 'sola scriptura' understanding of the Reformation period, have been in the expectation of a lively future period based on the literal meaning of the Bible. In this direction, it is known that at least since the beginning of the nineteenth century, various Christian groups,

especially in the context of the Protestant tradition, have had a strong expectation that the Jews should return to Palestine, to the region of Judea, in the context of the narrative of the chosen people of God, i.e. the Israelites, and the promised land. Based on various Biblical passages, these groups have fierce expectations concerning the exiled Jews returned to Palestine (Deuteronomy 30:3, Isaiah 43:6, Ezekiel 34: 11-13), to build the Temple there (Dan 9:27, Matthew 4:5, Rev 11:1), to be attacked by the surrounding nations (Dan 9:26-27, 12:1, 11, Zech 11:16), and so on. These Christians believed that the return of the Jews to Palestine was essential for Jesus Christ, the Son of God, to descend to the earth, establish the Kingdom of God there, and start a golden age, and they consequently endeavored at every opportunity to encourage the return of the Jews to Palestine and to produce projects in this regard.

In this direction, since the late 18th century, various Christian writers, such as James Bicheno and Thomas Witherby, have written in the context of a restoration project for the Jews to return to Palestine with the help of European powers. Moreover, on 23 February 1841, the Colonial Times published an article titled 'Memorandum to Protestant Monarchs of Europe for the restoration of the Jews to Palestine' in which Christian governments in Europe were asked to produce projects on this issue. In the following period, various churches, which came to the forefront with their dispensationalist approaches to the future period, carried out an intensive campaign for the Jews to return to Palestine, to establish a sovereign nation-state there, and to build the third temple in Jerusalem.

This restoration project, which is expressed by Christian groups that the Jews should return to Palestine as soon as possible, shows that the idea of establishing a state for the Jews in Palestine, which is the main motivation of Zionism, was present in the minds of these Christians even before the term Zionism entered the literature. Although the term Zionism entered the literature for the first time in the late 19th century, Zionism as a way of thinking has been present in the Christian tradition from much earlier periods. As a matter of fact, when the First Zionist Congress convened in 1897, among its participants were Christians such as Jean Henry Dunant (1828-1910). These Christians, who wholeheartedly support Jewish Zionism, are called 'Christian Zionists', and today this very influential group especially in North America and Western Europe, stands out with their unlimited support for the occupation of Palestine. Christian Zionists believe that Jews are chosen as an ethnic identity and that the land promised to them is a product of divine will, and therefore any support for the settlement of Jews in Palestine and their domination there is a religious obligation for them.

As a result, the occupation of Palestine is justified not only by the political, military, and economic interests of the global powers in the context of colonialism and imperialism, but also by strong religious arguments in the context of Jewish people as an ethnically chosen nation of God and the doctrine of the promised land for this chosen people. However, the belief in the Jews as a chosen nation and the Promised Land is purely retrospective fiction since the statements in the Bible on this subject are produced in the context of a retrospective construction of history based on traumatic events in the history of the Israelites.

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