

The Provinces of Palestine

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The geographical position of Palestine gave it a political importance greater than that to which its extent and population would otherwise have entitled it. Situated between Syria, Egypt, and Assyria, and on the highway to Persia, Arabia, and India, it became in turn the object of the cupidity of its neighbors, and the battle-ground on which their contests were decided.

Consequently, except during the reigns of David and Solomon, the inhabitants of Palestine had always more or less to act on the defensive. From the circumstances of the people and of their rulers from the division of the land into two rival monarchies and from the uncertain, shuffling, and short-sighted policy which was prosecuted by their kings, it was even found impossible to defend for any length of time the boundaries of Palestine. So far from occupying the position of political importance to which their situation, and the possession of so much seaboard, might have entitled the Hebrews, they gradually became dependent upon, and finally subject to, their neighbors. After the return from Babylon and the brief period of national independence under the Maccabees, the scepter entirely and finally departed from Judah, and every attempt to regain it proved unsuccessful.

At the time when the Savior appeared on earth, Palestine had undergone a fourth division and arrangement. The allocation amongst the tribes had given place to a monarchy. The latter had in turn been divided into the rival kingdoms of Judah and Israel. Now, Jew and Gentile had forgotten both tribes and kingdoms, and only spoke of **Galilee, Samaria, Judea, and Perea**.

The first of these provinces, **Galilee**, commonly divided into two districts, Upper and Lower, to which Jewish authorities added the district around Tiberias as a third, extended from near

the river Leontes, in Syria, to Scythopolis, on the Jordan, and from the borders of Tyre to Mount Carmel. Its western boundary consisted of a narrow strip of land along the seashore, and of Phoenicia. Eastward, it extended to the Jordan and the Lake of Gennesaret. Upper Galilee was mountainous, and inhabited in great part by Gentiles (hence the name, Galilee of the Gentiles); Lower Galilee was more level, and exceedingly fruitful. The people were brave and warlike. From their commixture with Gentiles, they were less addicted to the study of Jewish traditions or the observance of ceremonial injunctions, and hence despised by their brethren of the south. This remark applies chiefly to the inhabitants of Upper Galilee.

The prosperity of this province is sufficiently indicated by the large number of its towns, which at the commencement of the Jewish war are said to have amounted to 240, of which, according to Josephus, the smallest contained not less than 15,000 inhabitants. Although this computation is evidently exaggerated, some idea of its populousness may be gathered from the fact that in the war with the Romans, Josephus was able to raise in Galilee alone an army of no less than 100,000 men. Galilee covered the ancient possessions of the tribes of Issachar, Zebulun, Asher, and Naphtali. Its most fertile and beautiful district was that around the Lake of Gennesaret, where, along with the products of cooler zones, in certain situations, those of tropical climates also adorned and enriched the landscape during many months; and a rich soil was assiduously cultivated by a diligent and enterprising population.

Samaria, which covered the ancient inheritances of Ephraim and the half tribe of Manasseh, bordered to the north on Galilee, and was smaller than either of the other provinces of Palestine. It formed nearly a square, as the western strip of land along the Mediterranean, and almost as far as Mount Carmel, was reckoned part of the province of Judea. The soil was fertile, and although the watercourses were not abundant, frequent showers compensated for their want. The water of

¹ extracted from Edersheim, Alfred, *History of the Jewish Nation after the Destruction of Jerusalem under Titus*, Chapter 9, *Social Condition of Palestine*.

Samaria was said to be peculiarly sweet. This, together with the quantity of aromatic herbs which grew in the country, gave the Samaritan agriculturists a more than ordinarily large and good supply of milk. The inhabitants, who formed a numerous and prosperous community, lived for the most part at enmity with the Jews ever since the time of the building of the second temple. The occasions when common hopes or misfortunes joined the two classes were rare and of short duration. In general, a mutual distrust and bitterness characterized their relations.

The Jews accused the Samaritans of being the lineal descendants of heathens, of practicing idolatry, of deceitfulness, etc.; and the Samaritans retorted by such acts of vengeance and malice as opportunity afforded. Commonly the two parties avoided each other, the Jews preferring to take the longer road to Jerusalem beyond the Jordan to passing through Samaria, by which the capital might have been reached from Galilee in three days. The opinions as to the lawfulness of intercourse with the Samaritans differed with circumstances and Rabbins. Some went even so far as to forbid the purchase of uncooked animal food from them, or the sojourning under the same roof; but usually a clear distinction was drawn between the Samaritans and heathens or idolaters.

The third province of Palestine was **Judea**, which extended southwards to the borders of Arabia, and westwards along the seashore for a considerable distance. In every respect the most important province of the country, it was in part mountainous, and the neighborhood of the sea was specially adapted for pasturage. From the time of the Maccabees, Idumea was joined to Judea, but retained its peculiar name. The Talmud distinguishes in Judea, as in Galilee, three districts : the mountains, the plain, and the south. For civil purposes it was divided into eleven Toparchies or districts; geographically it may be distinguished into Eastern and Western Judea.

The district on the other side of the Jordan, known by the name of **Peraea**, was divided into three smaller portions, varying in size, fertility, and populousness. This province also was in part mountainous and in part desert. The history of Peraea was not of great importance : within its limits lay the greater part of the Decapolis (or ten cities), so well known to the readers of the New Testament.

Palestine had more towns and villages than might have been expected, considering the agricultural pursuits of the majority of its inhabitants. At first, towns had chiefly served for protection to the agricultural population. But as the wants of the people, so the number of cities also increased. Jewish authorities distinguished between cities or fortified places and common towns, which were reputed large if they could produce ten men whose wealth relieved them from the necessity of manual labor, and small if their number were less. The defense of cities consisted of thick walls, whose gates were often covered with iron, and strongly barred. Above the gates rose watchtowers, and along the walls other works of defense. Outside the walls ran a ditch, and beyond it a low wall. The streets were in general narrow, as those of modern Eastern towns. The shadowy retreat of the gates, with the distant prospect and the busy throng around, formed the place of public resort, where the elders of the city commonly assembled, and the concerns of the town or public affairs were discussed.

Sometimes the Rabbis taught in the streets, although this practice was soon interdicted in the spirit of Jewish aristocracy. Our Lord, however, seems to have availed Himself of the opportunity of addressing in the streets those who would not otherwise have heard Him. Jerusalem itself was paved with white stones, and Antioch enjoyed the same convenience through the liberality of Herod the Great. From the nature of the soil, most of the other cities, built on high and rocky ground, scarcely required pavement. The streets and markets had names attached to them, which were

generally derived from the shops, or bazaars in them. In Caesarea the sewerage was well attended to, and generally nothing that could contribute to comfort or ornament was neglected. The supply of water was derived either from aqueducts, from wells and fountains, or most commonly from cisterns.

[A whole treatise of the Mishnah deals with municipal regulations. Many of these can hardly have been carried out in practice, but the account of them shows us at least what was the theory of the Rabbins on this subject, and throws light on many details of social life.]

In the towns, watchmen patrolled the streets at night. Still, the darkness of the streets at night, though comparatively little felt where engagements commenced and ended with the day, rendered it unsafe to go abroad after sunset, especially if the police regulations were not strictly enforced. In general, these regulations were strict, and provided for all possible emergencies. Larger houses were often occupied by more than one family, and still more frequently two or more smaller dwellings opened into one common court, a convenience felt indispensable by the Jews. House watchers, like the porters in most continental cities, watched over the safety and attended to the general wants of these houses. To obviate occasion of dispute, neighbors were prevented from opening windows which looked into the courts or rooms of others, or shops to which the entrance led through a common court.

Attention was likewise paid to the appearance of the streets, and proprietors were not allowed to build beyond the line, or to make any projection on their houses. Not only were the inhabitants of towns guarded from intrusion or inconvenience, but sanitary regulations, which outstrip those of our own cities, protected them from the carelessness, selfishness, or folly of their fellow-citizens. Thus a certain space had to intervene between the dwelling of a neighbor and what could occasion annoyance to him; while cemeteries, tanneries, and similar places which might endanger the health or

prevent the comfort of the citizens, had to be removed at least fifty cubits from towns. So careful in this matter were the authorities, that bakers' or dyers' shops, stables, etc., were not tolerated under the dwelling of another person. A year's residence, or the purchase of property, constituted residence, and imposed on the citizen the obligation of contributing to the common expenditure or city taxation. Of the courts of law in the different towns, we may observe that in every city there were civic authorities.

But in those parts of Palestine in which there was a more or less influential Gentile population, the constitution of the towns varied considerably. In the strictly Jewish territory all civic business was doubtless in the hands of the local college of elders. The position of these authorities must have been greatly affected by the two Jewish revolts; but, even after the total loss of national independence, the Jews were for the most part allowed to decide questions of civil law among themselves, while their courts sometimes usurped also criminal jurisdiction.