

# The Balfour Declaration and the ways of providence

## 2. Chemistry and prophecy

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*Having shown in the [first article](#) how the British statesman Arthur Balfour and the scientist and Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann were providentially brought together, in our second article we look at the events leading to the all-important declaration which bears Balfour's name.*

**W**HEN GREAT BRITAIN entered the First World War it was totally unprepared for a major land-based conflict. Whilst the European countries had armies numbering millions of men, Britain only had a small standing army. Furthermore, British industry was ill-equipped to provide munitions for such a conflict. Added to that, a devastating submarine blockade began to bring shortages of those raw materials that Britain needed for the war effort.

### Making acetone

By 1916 there was a serious shortage of acetone, which was the solvent for making cordite (the propellant for shells). In March 1916 the Admiralty got to hear that a chemist in Manchester, Dr Weizmann, whom we met in the [previous article](#), had invented a process for making acetone. (In fact this process was a failed experiment; he had been attempting to ferment bacteria to make a precursor for synthetic rubber. Instead the bacteria produced acetone. Weizmann's professor advised him to pour it down the drain, but he wrote up the work and forgot about it.)

Weizmann was called before Winston Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty, who said, "Well, Dr Weizmann, we need thirty thousand tons of acetone. Can you make it?". Weizmann replied that he had so far made a few hundred cubic centimetres in a laboratory!

Over the next two years, Weizmann was given whatever he needed to scale up this process. Factories were built in Poole, Dorset, and on the dockside at Kings Lynn. The process required maize, but when this became scarce, Weizmann turned to conkers (horse chestnuts) as an alternative source of starch. Schoolboys throughout

the land were encouraged to collect conkers for the good of the war effort, and for months piles of rotting conkers could be seen outside railway stations awaiting collection for Dr Weizmann's process.

This 'coincidence' gave Weizmann a great opportunity to progress the cause of Zionism in the corridors of power. In fact, in his memoirs, David Lloyd George, the prime minister, described the Balfour Declaration as a kind of reward to Dr Weizmann for his contribution to the war effort. However, it would appear that this was not entirely the case. In fact, Weizmann had already met most of the members of the British Cabinet shortly after the start of the war.

### Unexpected support

The editor of the *Manchester Guardian*, Mr C. P. Scott, was a well-known supporter of Zionism. He was instrumental in introducing Weizmann to Lloyd George (then Chancellor) in December 1914. Lloyd George was later to recall that, "When Dr Weizmann was talking of Palestine he kept bringing up place names which were more familiar to me than those on the Western Front!". It would appear, therefore, that the interest of such men in the Zionist cause was at least partly due to their religious upbringing and their familiarity with the Bible.

Another politician that Weizmann was to meet was Herbert Samuel, who was also a Jew. Weizmann was "frightened out of his wits" by Samuel. He was considered to be one of the establishment Jews who were implacably opposed to the Zionist cause.<sup>1</sup> To Weizmann's astonishment, Samuel announced that he had been preparing a memorandum on a Jewish state in Palestine.

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1. Ironically, the most implacable opponents of Zionism were Jews such as Edwin Montague, Secretary of State for India, who wanted to assimilate into society and felt that Zionism would provoke anti-Semitism. Balfour considered this to be a specious argument.

## A significant day

Allenby entered Jerusalem on the first day of the feast of Hanuka, which is on the 25th day of the 9th month (Kislev), the Turks having been driven out the day before. The prophet Haggai provides the significance of this date: “Consider now from this day and upward, from the four and twentieth day of the ninth month, even from the day that the foundation of the LORD’S temple was laid, consider it . . . from this day will I bless you” (2:18,19)—another parallel with the time of the return of the captivity following Cyrus’ decree. From that day in 1917 the fortunes of Israel began to turn. The Holocaust was yet to come, of course, but the capture of Jerusalem by a British army signified the end of the centuries of Turkish rule and the beginning of the process that led to the formation of the State of Israel in 1948.

Weizmann began to realise at last that there was a real possibility of support from Britain for the Zionist cause.

Shortly after this interview, Weizmann renewed his acquaintance with Arthur Balfour (then at the Admiralty). Balfour had not forgotten his conversation with Weizmann, referred to in the [previous article](#), and, when Weizmann walked into the office, Balfour said to him, “You know, I was thinking of that conversation of ours, and I believe that when the guns stop firing, you may get your Jerusalem”.

### The land of Palestine

By an unfortunate accident (no doubt providentially guided), Germany managed to get Turkey, a traditional ally of Britain, to enter the First World War on its side. The Ottoman Empire was not considered to be strong militarily, and had been described as ‘the Sick Man of Europe’. Nevertheless it occupied a very strategic position in the Middle East, controlling the Dardanelles (the straits between the Mediterranean and the Black Sea) and also bordering the Suez Canal (an essential artery of British trade with India).

When stalemate prevailed on the Western Front, Churchill proposed a campaign to take the Dardanelles at Gallipoli and thereby open up another front into Europe. This was a disastrous failure. In fact it appears that the Allies were not intended to make progress here or on the Western Front until another matter was settled.

In spring 1917 Lloyd George appointed Sir Edmund Allenby<sup>2</sup> to the command of British forces in Egypt, and gave him the objective of capturing Jerusalem before Christmas. This, he said, would be a Christmas present for the British nation, a much-needed tonic to counter the horrific losses on the Western Front.

Significantly, amongst the soldiers fighting in the Expeditionary Force was a small infantry regi-

ment of Jewish soldiers, wearing the Star of David as their regimental badge. The Jewish Legion, as it was called, had a Jewish chaplain, kosher cooks, had instructions in English and Hebrew, and was allowed to have Saturday as the day of rest. Although few in number, these soldiers were to play a significant part in helping to capture their homeland from the Ottoman Empire.

The invasion began in October 1917. Allenby took Gaza and broke through the Turkish lines on 4 November, the anniversary of the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus. The invasion of Palestine was not accomplished easily, however. The ‘Sick Man of Europe’ held onto his territories tenaciously. But eventually Allenby was successful, and after many losses he marched into Jerusalem on 11 December 1917, the day of the Jewish Feast of Hanukah. Allenby<sup>3</sup> realised the significance of this event, and he and his men dismounted and walked into Jerusalem on foot through the Jaffa Gate. There was to be no ostentatious display of triumphalism.

If we view these events with Bible prophecy in mind, we can see clearly that the capture of Jerusalem was the most significant event of the First World War. Moreover, everything else had to wait until that event, and once it was accomplished the stalemate began to clear; within twelve months the war was over.

2. Allenby was a descendent of Oliver Cromwell. Jill Hamilton, in her book *God, Guns and Israel*, points out that, 261 years after Cromwell allowed the Jews back into England, his descendant, acting on behalf of the British nation, was doing the same for them in Palestine.
3. Allenby read his Bible every day, and during the Palestine campaign it is said that he said suddenly, “Look at that big rock in front of us! That must be just the place where Jonathan and his armour bearer climbed up and attacked the Philistine garrison”.

## The Balfour Declaration

On 2nd November 1917 the Balfour Declaration was published. Balfour, by then the Foreign Secretary, was in an ideal position to get the Declaration published, with the support of the majority of his Cabinet colleagues. It was the result of extensive talks between Weizmann, Lord Rothschild (considered leader of the Jewish community in Britain) and many other interested parties. However, it was vehemently opposed by Edwin Montague and the other assimilationists, who succeeded in getting changes to the wording inserted which watered down the original intention of declaring outright that "Palestine should be reconstituted as the National Home for the Jewish People" with internal autonomy. The final text read:

"His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country".

### How effective was the Declaration?

In its way, we can view the Balfour Declaration as an echo of the Decree of Cyrus (Ezra 1:1-4), a statement from the king of an empire allowing the Jews to return to their native land. Like Cyrus's decree before it, the intention was not properly carried through. Subsequent governments prevaricated. The Jews were not allowed to have their own independence, and emigration of Jews to Palestine was often severely curtailed. In fact it is a matter of great shame that Britain did not throw open the doors of the Land to Jews when it became evident that anti-Semitism was on the

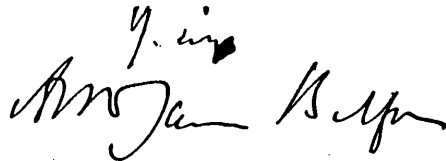
Foreign Office,  
November 2nd, 1917.

Dear Lord Rothschild,

I have much pleasure in conveying to you, on behalf of His Majesty's Government, the following declaration of sympathy with Jewish Zionist aspirations which has been submitted to, and approved by, the Cabinet.

"His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country".

I should be grateful if you would bring this declaration to the knowledge of the Zionist Federation.



rise again in Europe in the 1930s (an attitude that Britain was punished severely for in the 1940s).

Another strong parallel with the times of Ezra and Nehemiah can be seen in the opposition of the Arabs to the new Jewish settlers. As the First World War came to its close, the resurgent Arab nations (the modern equivalents of Sanballat and Tobiah in the book of Nehemiah) became increasingly opposed to the fledgling Jewish state in their midst. Britain's tacit encouragement of the Arabs only exacerbated the situation. Much of the trouble in the Middle East can be attributed to the way Britain mishandled the situation in Palestine during this period.

Many Jews still regard this statement as one of the founding charters of the State of Israel, and there is no doubt that without it the path

## Weizmann and Balfour

The friendship that arose between Weizmann and Balfour is another interesting aspect of the story. That a British aristocrat and a Russian-born Jew from a humble background should ever have struck up a friendship is a remarkable thing. One of Weizmann's first projects in Palestine after the First World War was to establish the Hebrew University on Mount Scopus outside Jerusalem. In 1925, at the age of 77, Balfour accepted Weizmann's invitation to travel to the site to give the inaugural address (dressed in his robes as Chancellor of the University of Cambridge). He was given a rousing reception wherever he went in Israel, but in the Syrian territories there was a riot and he had to depart hastily. Perhaps the most touching scene is the final picture of Balfour on his deathbed. Weizmann was the only non-family member allowed in to see him before he died.

I know it might be said that these things are incidental to the fulfilment of prophecy, but I feel there is something very significant about it all, especially when you think that this is prophecy being fulfilled before our eyes. Perhaps one day we will have a much clearer view of the way in which the angels have brought about God's will among the nations.



Site at the Hebrew University where Balfour gave the inaugural address.

(Picture: Tony Benson)

to the National Home would have been much more difficult. In his book *A History of the Jews*, Paul Johnson considers that the Declaration was made possible by the disorganisation of the Arabs caused by the Turks destroying the Syrian nationalist movements. "If the Arabs as a whole had been properly organized diplomatically during the war—if the Palestinian Arabs had been organized at all—there is not the slightest doubt that the Declaration would never have been issued. Even twelve months later it would not have been possible. As it was, Weizmann pulled the Zionists through a brief window of opportunity, fated never to open again" (p. 430).

We, of course, believe that such windows of opportunity are created by angelic intervention in the affairs of men. Here truly we can see the 'ways of Providence' at work bringing about God's purpose in modern times.

Let us look up and lift up our heads as our redemption draws near!

### For further reading

***Trial and Error*, Chaim Weizmann, Hamish Hamilton.** This is a most interesting account by Weizmann of his life and work. He clearly believed in God and was thankful for what was accomplished (pp. 375,571). Also, his belief, based on the Torah, that justice should be fair, swift and without bias to Jew or Arab

(p. 566) is an indication of his moderate stance. He was very much against the extremist tendencies of the more militant Jews (pp. 537-8). He became first president of the State of Israel on its formation in May 1948.

***The Bible and the Sword*, Barbara Tuchman, Papermac (ISBN 0-333-33414-0).** Tuchman is a very readable historian (it would seem of Jewish parents). In her book she plots the history of the interaction between Britain, the land of Palestine and the Jews. Her summary of the events leading to the Balfour Declaration is a very careful analysis of the people who took part and their motives. Well worth a read.

***God, Guns and Israel*, Jill Hamilton, Sutton Publishing (ISBN 0-7509-3324-0)** covers similar ground to Tuchman, except that she concentrates more on the background to the politicians and makes it very clear that many of them were motivated by religious conviction in their desire to do something for the Jews. Her accounts of the retaking of Jerusalem and the activities of General Allenby are particularly interesting.

***Balfour*, E. H. H. Green (in the series *The 20 British Prime Ministers of the 20th Century*), Haus Publishing Limited, ISBN 1-904950-55-8).** This gives the background on Balfour himself, a useful summary.