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*The End of the Dream of Biblical Israel*  
Paul V.M. Flesher

Since the end of the 19th century, it has been clear that Zionist Jews considered the Land of Israel, then known as Palestine, to be their homeland. The Hebrew Bible (Christian Old Testament) told the history of the Jews in Israel and the Zionists were determined to return to that land and to reclaim that inheritance. The Bible provided a guide to the land they understood as rightfully theirs, especially with regard to its borders.

Last week's election in Israel showed that Israelis no longer wish to assert that claim except in general terms. Fewer than 20 percent of the voters sided with parties pursuing that idea. Instead, Israeli voters abandoned the hope of a "Greater Israel" in exchange for a physical separation between themselves and the Palestinians, a separation that may provide security and tranquility, but probably not peace.

By turning their backs on the "Greater Israel" concept, they are giving up the claim to nearly all the central areas of the biblical "Land of Israel," with the key exception of Jerusalem itself. These areas are the locations of most of the stories in the Hebrew Bible, where most of the biblical heroes who lived in the Land carried out their activities. The Israelis will then be left with the regions of Israel that are less historically important and which have little religious resonance.

Just what is the notion of "Greater Israel"? In Israeli political short-hand, it consists of the "lands of Judea and Samaria." These lands have specific biblical connotations. They refer not to the united monarchy of the Kingdom of Israel under David and Solomon, but to the two later kingdoms which split off from it under Solomon's son Rehoboam.

The use of the term Samaria indicates the northern Kingdom of Israel at its greatest extent under King Omri in the eighth century BCE. Omri moved the capital to the city of Samaria, and lent its name as a moniker for the country. Although Judea might more properly be called Judah, it refers to the largest extent of the nation or province that bore that name. Whatever the name, its capital was always Jerusalem.

The territories of Judea and Samaria encompass the area north to Galilee, west of the Jordan River, south to the Gulf of Eilat (Aqaba), and west to the Mediterranean Sea. The modern nation of Israel lies upon most of this territory. There is, however, a large area in the middle where Palestinians live. Prior to 1967 it was part of Jordan, but since the Six-Day War it has been occupied by Israel. This is known as the "West Bank."

The problem is that the West Bank covers the area where most of the Hebrew Bible's stories take place. Not only does it lie on the central area of the two kingdoms, but inside its territory is Hebron, Jericho, Samaria and Shechem, and Bethel. It is where the tribes of Judah and Joseph (i.e., Manasseh and Ephraim) carried out their rivalry; this is where the Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob lived and were buried; it is here that the Judges guided the tribes of Israel and in which the prophets advised their listeners. The West Bank also contains the biblical city of Jerusalem, which Israel has now formally annexed.

Here is where "Greater Israel" comes in. The Likud party, which has dominated Israeli politics for the past two decades, has held that Israel should formally annex the West Bank and make it part of Israel. Since the Hebrew Bible treats this region as the heartland of the Holy Land, the Zionist return to the Land, in their view, can only be complete when it belongs to the nation of Israel.

Last week's election rejected that view. Likud won less than 10 percent of the vote; even with parties of similar views, they carried less than 20 percent of the electorate. The parties favoring an independent Palestinian state on the West Bank won a majority of seats in the Knesset, Israel's parliament. The Israeli voters have decided that it is time to say "Enough!" to the biblically-based Zionist dream of possessing these central ancestral lands. It is better to live in peace in the rest of the Land.