

What Kuypers Saw and Thought: Abraham Kuypers Visit to the Holy Land¹

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Abraham Kuypers account of his 1905–06 Palestinian tour, “The Holy Land,” was first published in *Om de oude wereldzee*, the two-volume travelogue of his extensive journey around the countries of the Mediterranean which he took as a consolation for losing his bid for reelection as Prime Minister of the Netherlands.² Ironically, he had at first intended to skip Palestine and travel by boat directly from Beirut to Cairo. The reason? In 1876 an intended trip from Marseille to Jaffa had to be aborted due to serious illness, and since then he had heard nothing good about the place from travellers who claimed their visits had disappointed in numerous ways. But in the end the choice to by-pass Palestine left him with feelings of guilt and disrespect: “To visit Syria and Egypt, but not the *Holy Land*, that I could not make myself do” (*HHL*, 10). And seeing this visit in the context of reading the entire *Om de oude wereldzee*, his reluctance makes some sense. His main motive for this world journey was to understand the region in global politics and its potential for economically successful colonization.³

1. A plenary lecture delivered on 12 October at the 2011 Bavinck Conference, “After 9/11/11 . . . What? Reformed Theology and the Church’s Global Mission Today,” held at Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

2. “Het Heilige Land,” in *Om de oude wereldzee*, vol. 1 (Amsterdam: Van Holkema and Warendorf, 1907), ch. 9; hereafter: *OOW*; republished as *Palestina: het heilige land* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1925); hereafter: *HHL*. See figure 1.

3. James D. Bratt, *Abraham Kuypers Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 325–35, describes the entire journey recounted in *OOW* and covers in particular Kuypers four excursions from his travel account on the significant others affecting the state of the world: “Het



Figure 1: Covers from *Om de oude wereldzee* and *Palestina: het heilige land*

For these interests he considered Palestine to be a backwater destination without contemporary value except for its salvific geography, its “Biblical-era splendor.”⁴ Thus the bypassing of Palestine meant a show of disrespect in paying greater homage to the contemporary worth of Egypt and Syria than to the value of Palestine as the locale of the incarnation of Jesus. What he actually saw and thought during his visit confirmed his preconceived hunch and justified his choice to include Palestine in his journey after all. “Though I hesitated momentarily,” he wrote, “I nevertheless in the end made the right choice” (*HHL*, 10).

Aziatische Gevaar” (the Asian threat), “De Zigeuners” (Gypsies), “Het Joodsche Probleem” (the Jewish problem), and “Het Raadsel van den Islam” (the riddle of Islam).

4. Bert De Vries, “Archaeology,” in *Encyclopedia of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, vol. 1, *A-H*, ed. Cheryl A. Rubenberg (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner, 2010), 105.



L. G. Leary, Syria: *The Land of Lebanon*. New York: McBride, Nast and Co 1913

Figure 2: Hauran map showing the railway lines used for the journey from Damascus to Samakh Station south of the Sea of Galilee.

Therefore, I've made the theme of this article "What Kuyper Saw and Thought." In part 1, "Experiencing the Biblical Past in Its Geographic Setting," we see how the tour affirms his conviction that the glamor of the land is indeed in its reflection of "het heilige." In Part 2, "Seeing and Thinking about the Palestine of 1905," we follow his investigation into the worth of Palestine in the larger religio-political economy of the colonial world in the decade before World War I. My method of presentation is to use Kuyper's own words (what he thought) in combination with pictures of what he describes (what he saw). The core of this article is thus key quotations with the Dutch originals embedded in the illustrations and my translations quoted in the text of the article. For those who do not read Dutch the article will make sense in English, but those who read Dutch will be able to enjoy the rich, colorful, and emotionally charged quality of Kuyper's original words. The one exception is a long quotation, the opening three pages, which, for economy of space, I give only as my translation in the text. In the illustrations

all color photographs are by the author unless otherwise noted, and all black and white photographs are from another early Dutch Palestine travel book by A. Noordtijzij.⁵

Part 1: Experiencing the Biblical Past in Its Geographic Setting

An Informed Dissertation on the History and Population of the Hauran

Kuyper traveled from Damascus across the fertile plain of the Hauran to the west of the “Druse Mountain” using the recently developed French railway designed to transport goods, especially grain, from this region to Haifa on the coast (*OWW*, 426–27; fig. 2).

This region comprises both the modern Golan occupied by Israel and, to its east, the Hauran of southern Syria and northern Jordan where I have my archaeological project at Umm el-Jimal (www.ummeljimal.org). As he watched from the windows of the train you can picture his excited note taking as he witnessed the obvious agricultural richness of the land and the numerous villages with cores of black basalt ruins from the Roman, Byzantine, and early Islamic centuries. While writing an excellent description of the recently settled Druze and Arab communities, he exclaimed, “it experienced its greatest flowering under the strict Roman administration,” and “During this resettlement of the Hauran the new inhabitants found they had convenient and useful ruined cities at their disposal” (*OWW*, 428; fig. 3). In fact, he says, some of the ancient houses were so well built and preserved, the new settlers could simply move in and avail themselves of the old stone tables and benches still in place. As always he was especially interested in the religiously and politically anomalous group, the Druze, so we get a short dissertation on their culture; though, he also remarks on the warm hospitality of the local Arab villagers (*OWW*, 428–29).

Because this region is my own research habitat I should report that his elaboration on what he saw is essentially correct. The combination of his actual travels and his later research enabled him to get a pretty accurate picture of both the modern socio-economic

5. *Palestina en het land van den Jordaan* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1926).

setting and its relationship to the ancient archaeological remains in the landscape. Interestingly, in January and February of 1905 the outstanding archaeologists H. C. Butler (Princeton University Expedition to South Syria, 1905, 1909) and Gertrude Bell preceded him in the Hauran. However, he gives no indication of meeting them or any other archaeologist on his entire journey from Damascus through Palestine. I get the sense they passed like ships in the night. At least he did not seek them out for interviews as he did Turkish authorities, foreign dignitaries, and colonists; but his later library work, which is not credited with references, may have led him to the results of their work.

“....het kende zijn hoogsten bloeitijd onder de straffe Romeinsche administratie...”
“By dat weer bevolken van de Hauran vonden de nieuwe bewoners hier dan noch alleszins bruikbare vervallen steden to hun beschikking.... “ (OOW 428)



Figure 3: A basalt façade at Umm el-Jimal, Jordan, representative of the ruins Kuyper saw from the window of his train from Damascus.

I also sense that here, still outside Palestine, he is able to see and focus on modern people more directly, whereas, as soon as he got off the train at the Sea of Galilee, he started seeing Biblical events in the modern geography (fig. 4). Consequently, he seemed

less able to admire the people of Palestine as openly as he did the Druze and the Arabs that he saw in the Syrian Hauran.

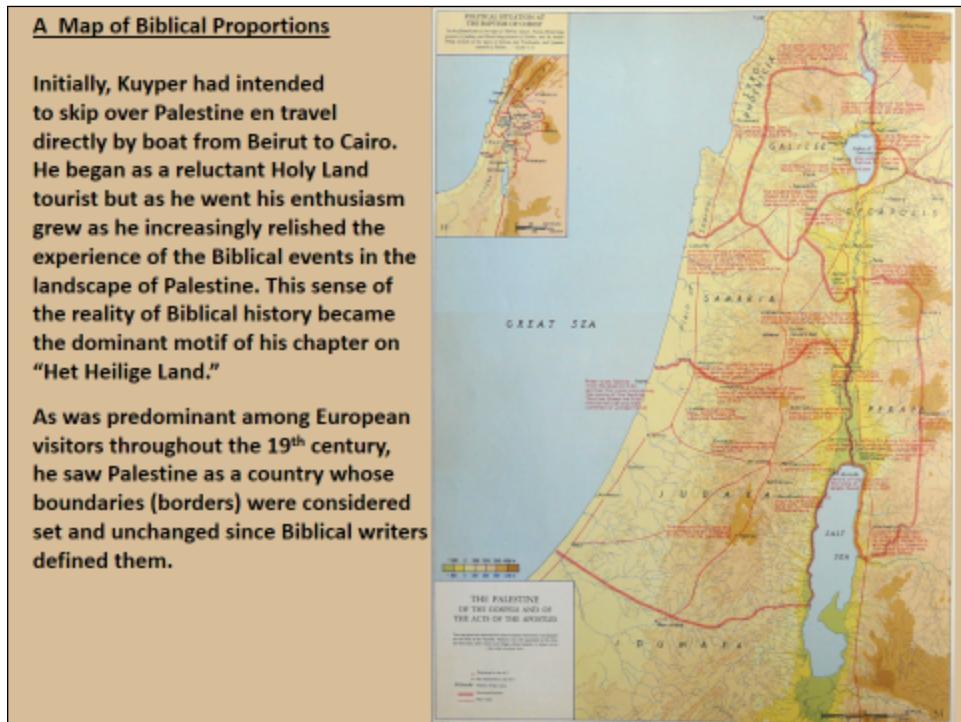


Figure 4: Map of Biblical Palestine.

The “Holy” in “Het Heilige Land”

The Setup: “Propelled through the Dark-Hued Water”

When Kuyper disembarked the train at Samack and stood on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, and it was as though his “seeing” was instantly changed, as though he had put on a different set of glasses. The flavor of this transformation by which Kuyper saw Palestine differently than the other regions of the Mediterranean covered in *OOW* is caught perfectly in the first three pages of *HHL*:

From the small railroad station at Samack, where you arrive by train coming from Damascus, you descend a high, grey and steep rock slope to the shore where the waters of Lake Gennesareth lap at your feet. At this shore a contingent of six Turkish musketeers stood on guard, and a sturdy boat with six men at oar lay ready to row the small party across to Tiberias. As it was already late and Tiberias still ten kilometers distant,

we stepped into the boat without further ado, and before we were even settled, were gliding with rhythmic oar strokes across the gently rolling lake's surface.

For close to two hours we were propelled through the dark-hued water as we cut across the lake, with silence all around us and also silence in the boat. Of the sort of rowers' song with which Venetian gondoliers might have serenaded us, there was not a trace of sound, and none of us were able to converse with the crew. Thus, disturbed by nothing, we each gave ourselves over to reflection on the impression the thrilling experience was making on us; thrilling not because of what we were witnessing, but because of the mystery that engulfed us.

The lake itself offers nothing captivating, neither in extent, nor in form nor in appearance, and ranks, whether geologically or scenically, far behind either Lake Lucerne or Lake Geneva. Even the friendliness of a softly up-sloping shore is missing here; mountaintops are not immediately visible; there is no liveliness of sprawled villages at water's edge, no prevalent farm-groves wafting their pleasant odors toward you, no herdsman leading his flock to water. Nothing is happening on this lake, so that it seems a pretty big deal to see a fishing dinghy darting into or out of a streamlet. The south and east coast especially is rendered inaccessible by a ten-meter high vertical rock wall; only on the north is there more gradually sloping terrain, and on the west coast also a woods. But when you add it all up you get the impression of a lifeless watery corner over which no birds flap their wings and from which no darting fishes jump up.

The only beauty came from the sky arching high over the lake; on the left the red fireball descending, and to the right the glassy-gleaming light-disk, which at first appeared to be resting on the earth, but then pulled itself up into the sky.

Even though this magical sky drama of sun and moon harmonized with the mystery that one's soul was seeking, this was not that mystery itself. Whatever stirred one on this quiet journey came from above, from the hidden world of spirit, through which a holy past welled up in my imagination.

It was the name of Jesus which from all the shores around me, and across the waters over which I was sliding, was called out to me. Forget Him and Lake Gennesareth loses every attraction, but if you visualize Him in your imagination, then at once everything around you is aglow as no lake in Switzerland could be. You see everything come to life in your mind's eye. There along the shore Jesus used to stroll, a throng of many thousands following him; from that hillside in the distance echoed the Sermon on the Mount in its quiet majesty. These waters on which you float quietly were, when they were storm-tossed, stilled by his command. Here he recruited those simple fishermen, who soon, as his anointed

apostles, would conquer the world for the Cross with their powerful words [*machtwoord*].

True, it wasn't here, but in Jerusalem that He suffered, died, and rose up; but here in Galilee, here with this Lake Gennesareth as the midpoint of his holy business, it was the Son of Man who spoke as might-possessed, who through his miracles astounded the throng and who as "Christus Consolator" spread blessings around him.

To be allowed to meditate under such an overpowering spell—disturbed by nothing for two full hours—brought me an enjoyment of spiritual enrichment the likes of which I found in no other spot in Palestine. For me it was as if, after Jesus's presence had been so powerful here that one time, after his departure everything here died out, leaving nothing behind besides the never dying memory of his holy Name. (*HHL*, 7–9; *OW*, 433–34; fig. 5)



"Het meer op zichzelf boeit noch door omvang, noch door vorm..." (*OW* 433)

"... het geheel maakte den indruk van een afgestorven waterhoek, waar geen vogel meer klapwiekte en waar geen dartelend vischje uit oopsprong." (*OW* 433–4)

"Het was mij of ... met zijn (Jesus') heengaan hier alles was uitgestorven..." (*OW* 434)

Figure 5: Lake Tiberias (Genessareth) seen from Um Qeis, Jordan.

What Makes the Holy Land Holy?

"What, then," Kuyper asks, "was the purpose for which Palestine was set apart as *holy*" (*HHL*, 15)? He began the answer with a huge negative: "But the holy significance of this land fell away after

it had fulfilled its higher task. . . . It sank into oblivion as though struck by a curse. All its earlier glory went under" (*HHL*, 14; fig. 6). Taken in the best light, he meant that that there is nothing inherently holy in the land. But he also meant this in a more emphatically negative way. After Jesus had departed, Kuyper could no longer see the sort of potential in the land that he saw in the other places he visited like the Hauran.



"Wat was toch het doel, waarvoor Palestina als *heilig* land was afgezonderd?" (*HHL* 15)

"Maar de heilige betekenis van dit land verviel dan ook, toen het zijn hoogerent last had uitgedienst.... Het zonk weg in onbeduidendheid en scheen als met een vloek beladen. Al zijn vroegere heerlijkheid ging onder." (*HHL* 14)

Figure 6: Close-up of Lake Tiberias with Jordanian university students.
Kuyper first saw it from the shore straight below them.

Thus we leave the land of the present for the land of the biblical past, for Kuyper's historical geography of the incarnation. As he put it,

the idea is, that as in Christ God's holy presence becomes concrete and touchable [*tastbaar*], that there be a community of people [*kring*] that can "grasp" spiritually the Father of the Spirits. To attain this goal, Israel as a people [*volk*] and Palestine as a land is set apart. For that reason it has been [*geweest*] the *Holy Land*. (*HHL*, 17; fig. 7)

“... het eind is, dat als in Christus Gods heilige aanwezenheid persoonlijk voelbaar, tastbaar wordt, er de kring is die geestelijk de Vader der geesten kan grijpen. Ter bereiking van dit doel is Israel als volk en Palestina als land afgezonderd. En deswege is ‘t het Heilige Land geweest” (HHL p. 17).



Pêcheurs sur le Lac de Génésareth

Fischer auf dem See Genezareth

Fischeren op de Lae of Genezaret

VISSCHERS OP HET MEER VAN GENNESARET.

Figure 7: Fishing on Lake Tiberias. As is true of much Christian Holy Land lore, quaint moderns like these fishermen were photographed and filmed as stand-ins for the disciples and other people around Jesus.

Strikingly, though this happened in the past, he puts the condition of Israel and the land in the present, by which he must mean the universal present of sacred history rather than the punctual present of ordinary history in which the land is actually under a curse.

After he crossed the lake he found proof of the curse on the land in the ruins of Roman-Byzantine Capernaum: “To Capernaum was extended the highest spiritual, truly divine, privilege. By refusing that it called on itself the total curse: it has been wiped off the face of the earth” (HHL, 40–41; fig. 8). Unless one takes such a statement as tongue-in-cheek, it represents an extreme replacement of archaeological and historical explanations of the decay of material remains of a civilization with the rather irrational alternative of God’s collective punishment. I wonder whether such sacred-historical notions still color the mystique of Holy Land tourism among members of Dutch and North American Reformed communities today. It seems at least true that on this score Kuyper was not innova-

tive but simply fell in line with the prevailing notions of “Biblical archaeology” among his contemporaries.⁶

“Aan Kapernaum was het hoogste geestelijk, een in waarheid goddelijk privilege gegund. Die heeft het van zich gestooten, en hiermee den volstreken vloek over zich gehaald. Het is weggevaagd van de aardbodem” (HHL, p. 40-41)



Capharnaüm

Kapernaum

Capharnaüm

KAPERAUM.

Figure 8: The ruins of Capernaum testify to the curse pronounced by Jesus.

Two Holy Mountains: Tabor and Carmel

Tabor: Chosen as the Mount of Transfiguration

In his journey from Lake Galilee to Jerusalem Kuyper visited cities and colonies that fit not only the inquest of his entire Mediterranean journey but also a selection of sites that followed the special preoccupation with the holiness of the land that he had reserved for Palestine. The next stop on this spiritual journey was Mount Tabor. “The Tabor,” he writes,

is totally unique in that it stands completely isolated; because its sides descended into a flat plain, it appears much higher than it really is (i.e., only 562 m above sea level). And because of its nearly perfect bowl-shape

6. De Vries, “Archaeology,” 105.

it appears like a mighty dome plunked down in the middle of the landscape. (HHL, 45)

Standing on top of the mountain, Kuyper relives the story of the Transfiguration: “What happened here is spellbinding. God’s entire purpose in Israel was to approach the human heart with His spiritual presence, to make evident the hidden glory of the higher world in this world” (HHL, 51–52; fig. 9).

“De Thabor is hier geheel eenig, dat hij geheel geïsoleerd staat, om een kant na alom tot in the vlakte afdaalt, hiervoor veel hooger voorkomt dan hij werkelijk is (want op zichzelf is 562 meter eer laag). En door zijn bijna zuiveren koepelvorm als een geweldige dom in het midden van het land schijnt neergezet” (HHL, p. 45).



“Aangrijpend is wat hier voorviel. Heel het doel Gods in Israel was, met zijn geestelijke aanwezendheid tot het menselijk hart te naderen, de verborgen Heelijkhed der hogere wereld in deze wereld waarneembaar te maken” (HHL, p. 51-52).

He attacks the critics for their “de vernietigende critiek op de Thabor-traditie” (HHL, p. 56):

“Maar ligt er dan toch niet iets wreeds in een critiek, die op zoo ongenoegzamen grond haar vernietigend oordeel doet rusten... Ja, is het niet of ze er zeker genoegen in vindt, achter elke pelgrim aan te sluipen en juist als hij zich weer aan heilig gepeins wil overgeven, hem in the fluisteren: ‘Altemaal gelogen inbeelding; ge vergaapt u aan de schijn!’” (HHL, p. 62)

Figure 9: Mount Tabor seen by telephoto lens from the east, from Um Qeis, Jordan.

But standing there he also sees the modern settlement and agricultural uses of the terrain, and he feels compelled to argue that, contrary to “the destructive criticism of the Thabor tradition” (HHL, 56), there had been a particular spot on the crest of the mountain where the very private theophany of the Biblical story could have taken place. His anger is hidden in the typically Dutch hyperbolic sarcasm I remember from my Dutch childhood:

But isn’t there something really wicked in a critical approach that allows its destructive conclusion to rest on such uncertain ground. . . ? Yes, isn’t

it so that they find a certain satisfaction by sneaking up on every pilgrim about to abandon himself in sacred reflections to whisper in his ear: “You’ve got an entirely distorted impression; you’re letting yourself get carried away by superficialities!” (*HHL*, 62; fig. 9)

My English, “sneaking up,” doesn’t really do justice to “aan te sluipen,” which conjures up the image of a tempting serpent slithering along and mouthing enticements which sway modern “Eves” into accepting its lies as the truth. For Kuyper, not only is the Transfiguration historically real but also it had to have happened here, at Tabor!

Carmel: Chosen for the Victory of Monotheism

From Tabor Kuyper traveled via Nazareth to Haifa. Although he was interested in the port and its Bahai, Jewish, and German colonial settlements, he found Mount Carmel the most fascinating feature of the coastal landscape not just for the startling transition from beach to mountain but much more so because here Baal and his priests were defeated by God and Elijah. Kuyper couches this battle in virtually Zoroastrian dualist terms as “[t]he struggle between the kingdom of Light against the kingdom of Darkness. . . . It was here that the spirit of God burst in on the spirit of humanity” (*HHL*, 74). This victory for monotheism through Elijah coalesces with Jesus’s prominent ministry in the Galilee: “not in Samaria, that fell away completely, nor in Judea, that chose legalistic ways, but here, high in the north, precisely where on the Carmel Baal’s power was broken” (*HHL*, 76; fig. 10).

More ships in the night: the German archaeologist Gottlieb Shumacher excavated Megiddo on the other side of Carmel from 1903 to 1906, and stayed at the Templar “Colony” in Haifa where Kuyper also stayed and which he described in detail (*OOW*, 447), but Kuyper did not meet him. Archaeology was not an important factor in Kuyper’s fascination with his conception of the Holy in “*Het Heilige Land*.” At Carmel sacred history trumped ordinary human history entirely.

"De worsteling van het rijk des Lichts tegen het rijk der Duisternis:"

"Het was hier de Geest des Heeren, die op den geest van het volk indrong..."
(HHL p. 74)

: "...niet in Samaria, dat geheel verliep, en ook niet in Judea, dat de nomistische paden koos, maar hier, hoog in het noorden, juist waar op de Karmel Baal's macht gebroken was" (HHL, p. 76).



Haifa et ion port, vu du Mont Carmel

Haifa mit Hafen, von Karmel gesehen

Haifa with Harbour, seen from Mt. Carmel

HAIFA, VAN DEN KARMEL GEZIEN.

Figure 10: View from Mount Carmel looking down on Haifa and its beaches.

Two Holy Cities: Jerusalem and Bethlehem

The Cosmic Meaning of Jerusalem

From Haifa Kuyper traveled to Jaffa via the highlands, passing through Jenin and Nablus, and from Jaffa he went up to Jerusalem and Bethlehem. With the basic substance of his "Heilige Land" thesis laid at Tiberias, Tabor, and Carmel, the visits to Jerusalem and Bethlehem become its punctuation marks. Jerusalem is its natural center, the locus for the very origin of "religion" defined as the three faiths which still revere its centrality: "the motif of religion . . . has its singular beginning in Jerusalem, in the Holy City, to which Jew and Mohammadan and Christian still journey in prayerful silence" (HHL, 115–16; fig. 11).

"Jesus and Jerusalem belong together inseparably" (HHL, 115; fig. 12), he asserted, and the key event of sacred history took place at Golgotha. Like at Tabor, he therefore has to take on the critics,

the archaeologists, who disparaged the possibility of locating either the location of the crucifixion or the burial sites from the available evidence.



Figure 11: The three religions of Jerusalem's Old City

Kuyper had no better evidence, but he had such a passionate need for the physical locale of redemption that he went through a process of elimination to deduce that it could not have happened anywhere but at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. “Thus I am convinced,” he concluded, “that specifically here (at the Church) the Christ suffered and died, and that here He arose from the dead on the third day. Standing on these holy places, I’m not a bit troubled, and I have believed” (HHL, 135; fig. 12). Thus the tradition of sacred history trumped the evidence of archaeology.

He contrasts the rational arguments of a natural scientist, a deist who relies only on evidence, with the simple acceptance of a believer like himself who when standing in the church *feels* (*voelt*) that this *is* the point where Golgotha and tomb come together (OOW, 522–23; fig. 13). He feels and therefore knows that he is at

the sacred center of the universe: “the center-point [*aspunt*] of the history of the world may for a while at least have been in Rome; here, where the cross stood, and Christ swallowed up death into the intensity of eternal life, not just the history of the world, but the whole of cosmic being has been revolving around its axis [*as*]” (*HHL*, 139; *OOW*, 524; fig. 13).



Figure 12: Church of the Holy Sepulcher. A pendentive dome support in the central nave (*catholicon*) depicting Mark with his Gospel.

No archaeologist can penetrate such confessional conviction of the truth, which simply flicks aside all that mundane sifting through material evidence and embraces the traditions of sacred geography and asserts this spot as *the* location of the passion of the Christ and therefore the center of everything. Kuyper passed on this holy land mystique to future generations, including my parents (who were “Kuyperians”), for whom the war-caused cancellation of a visit to Jerusalem (1973) was one of the major disappointments of their lifetimes.



Figure 13: Church of the Holy Sepulcher. The dome over the central nave for which the Mark pendentive (fig. 12) is one of the supports.

Bethlehem: the Locale of the Incarnation

Kuyper celebrated Christmas 1905 with the Latin Patriarch. He was much taken with Bethlehem's small-town character and the overwhelming majority of Christians among its population. He felt blessed to be there at the time of the Latin Christmas, enjoyed the decorations and celebrations at Manger Square, and relished being invited to the Christmas mass in the Church of the Nativity by the Patriarch. "The *Te Deum* I attended was impressive," he writes, "and then we all descended to the sacred spots" (*OOW*, 535; fig. 14).

The emotional intensity of his spiritual journey comes to a climax here as his constant stress on the centrality of Jesus and the incarnation became increasingly entwined with a frank veneration of the traditional places and structures where these events were believed to have happened. Sacred history needed a sacred geography, "Het Heilige Land," and the methods of Biblical theology (exegesis

of Scripture and confessions) blurred the methods of archaeology (analysis of soils and structures).



Figure 14: Priests saying mass over the grotto below the altar of the Church of the Nativity, the place where Jesus is believed to have been born.

Here in Bethlehem he was so convinced of the accuracy of the locale of Jesus's birth that he did not need to take on the critics as he had at Tabor and Jerusalem. Instead he took several pages to recall the history of quarrels over access to the sacred sites among the various Christian denominations and groups. He attributed this perpetual quarreling to the emotional volatility of easterners compare to westerners (*OOW*, 536–39; see below, p. 32).

But he counters his screed on Christian disunity with a concluding paean of praise for the splendid meaning of *the* Bethlehem event: "In Bethlehem all is Divine poetry. Our poetry is fiction, the depiction in song of a higher reality than the lackluster reality that presses on us. But Divine poetry is *creation*, the insertion into this reality of a higher reality than this world can offer us. And thus was the miracle of Bethlehem, the Incarnation of the Eternal Word,

amidst eradication of more than earthly glimmers” (*HHL*, 162; fig. 15).



Figure 15: Looking from the Milk Grotto across the rooftops to the churches of Bethlehem at Manger Square.

Comments on The “Holy” in “*Het Heilige Land*”

As an archaeologist I am underwhelmed by Kuyper’s need to prove the precise locations using a combination of logic and faith as a substitute for material evidence being made rapidly available by archaeologists who had been busy mapping, surveying, and excavating the cultural landscape.⁷ I react this way especially because, in the other aspects of his travel scholarship, he based his conclusions on careful and thorough collection of information.

To get a better handle on his notion of “holy land” it may help to see what he did not mean by it. First, he limited his labeling to

7. E.g., C. R. Conder and H. H. Kitchener, *The Survey of Western Palestine*, 3 vols. (repr. 1970; Jerusalem: Kedem Publishing, 1881).

the terms Palestine and Holy Land, and nowhere did he use the term “Promised Land” that is so much in vogue among modern fundamentalists. And following on that, he did not become an avid Zionist, though he was not adverse to Jewish colonization as we will see below.

In general Kuyper is typical of Christians who visit Israel-Palestine with a sense of this being the place where the deeds of salvation took place. But, as Gary M. Burge points out so well, there is a fine line between such a general sense of the geographic reality and forgetting that in Christ any earlier Biblical “theology of land” had been absorbed into the theology of redemption.⁸ Kuyper crosses that line in this work by mixing together the veneration of places with the celebration of the incarnation. That is why he has to be so defensive against the critics who were denying the possibility of scientific proof for the identification of the precise spots like Tabor and Golgotha where Biblical events took place. As a Christian one can be a tourist enjoying the reality of the earthly life of Jesus in the same way that one can enjoy visiting Chaco Canyon to appreciate the historical culture of the Anasazi. In each case physical nearness can make the event more real in the mind of the visitor. But one cannot cross the line from such tourism for education and enjoyment to actual pilgrimage, which means the actual veneration of those physical places which are felt to transmit mystical power.⁹ Kuyper let his initially unplanned tour of Palestine lapse into a pilgrimage once he decided to go. Ironically, in this way he left the door open for a veneration of physical space (land) among subsequent generations of Reformed Christians whose basic identity includes a tradition of protests against such behavior in medieval Catholicism. This is perhaps an unintended consequence of his emotional-spiritual enthusiasm for the physical reality of the incarnation, but real and damaging nevertheless.

8. *Jesus and the Land: The New Testament Challenge to “Holy Land” Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 125–31.

9. For discussion of the distinction, see Tony W. Cartledge, “Walk about Jerusalem: Protestant Pilgrims and the Holy Land,” in *Archaeology, Bible, Politics and the Media: Proceedings of the Duke University Conference, April 23–24, 2009*, eds. Eric M. Meyers and Carol Meyers (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2012), 139–43.

Part 2: Seeing and Thinking about the Palestine of 1905

The Political Geography of the Early Twentieth Century

Kuyper's journey through Syria and Palestine took place before the post-World War I drawing of the national borders by the European powers, when the region was still ruled from Istanbul as part of the Ottoman Empire. He says about the Turkish provincial designation of the region: "The drawing of the border around the land by the Turkish administration is thus also wholly arbitrary and solely determined by the intent of forming one Greater Syria from the Taurus to Egypt and from the Mediterranean to the desert . . ." (OOW, 442; fig. 16).

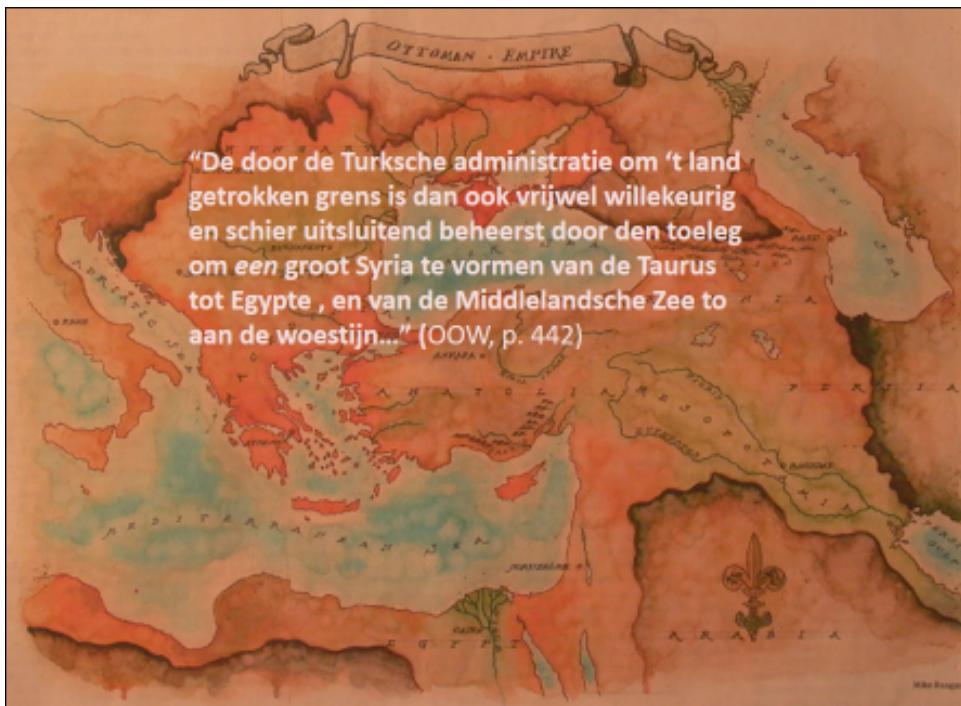


Figure 16: Map of the Ottoman Empire showing the region of "Greater Syria" (Levant) between the Taurus Mountains of Turkey and the Suez and between the Arabian-Syrian desert and the Mediterranean.

The Ottomans restored a system that had already been in effect in the Roman Empire in which Syria was considered a single

province with subdivision such as the governorate of Jerusalem. After the mid-nineteenth century reorganization in which Jerusalem was made a governorate covering most of Palestine within the province of Syria, the situation was eerily reminiscent of this Roman precedent. Local inhabitants also saw themselves as denizens of Greater Syria, *Bilad ash-Sham*, which is Arabic for “The Towns of Damascus.”

I’m not sure, therefore, why Kuyper saw this Greater Syria border as artificial, unless it was a threat to the prevailing Judeo-Christian notion that Biblical Palestine-Israel is a distinctive region with its own border permanently set by the conquests of Joshua and David. The really artificial borders in the region are those drawn by the allies in the post-World War I carving up of Greater Syria (1922–32). Even in the 1970s numerous acquaintances there identified themselves as much as denizens of Bilad ash-Sham as citizens of their respective nation-states, and the regional history from the Crusades to World War II is studied as the “History of Greater Syria” in the local regional universities today.

All this indicates that Kuyper did not really see the region through local eyes but through those of a Judeo-Christian Westerner.

Palestine as Kuyper Saw: A Degenerate Land Inhabited by Useless People

The Ruination of a “Paradise of Fertility”

Kuyper’s impression of the accursed land at the outset was confirmed by what he saw through the windows of his carriage as he crisscrossed the region on both coastal and highland roads. “It [the land] sank into insignificance,” he remarked, “and seemed as though stricken by a curse. All its former glory went under” (*HHL*, 14). And now “along the coastal road [we saw] nothing but small hovels and long distances apart an impoverished Khan or hostel” (*HHL*, 89; fig. 17).

The historical sequence in his mind is clear: a Biblical paradise, “land of milk and honey,” has been ruined, its “former glory” no longer visible. Earlier we saw this explained as a logical outcome for post-incarnation Palestine. Now, looking at the land and its people, he is seeing it and them through the rosy glasses of Israelites wan-

dering in the Sinai looking north and admiring huge bunches of grapes. This Bible-oriented stereotype, already prevalent in 1905, remains the norm among western Christians today.



Figure 17: Ruin of the main residence in Abwin, which was one of more than twenty “throne villages” that flourished in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Palestine.¹⁰

What his mind’s eye perceives as a former “paradise of fertility” (*OOW*, 443) his real eyes see as an undeveloped wasteland the de-

10. Suad Amiry, *Throne Village Architecture: Palestinian Rural Mansions in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (Arabic with summary in English). (Ramallah: RIWAQ, Centre for Architectural Conservation, 2004), 203. Kamal Abdulfattah and Bert de Vries, “The State of Agricultural Terraces in Palestine: A Photo Essay Based on a Visit to the Agricultural Village of Silwad,” in *Food and Foodways in the Middle East*, The Lower Jordan River Basin Programme Publications and Global Moments of the Levant 18, ed. Nefissa Naguib (Bergen: BRIC, 2009).

generation of which was caused by a post-Biblical decline of agricultural civilization:

This comes in part from the ruination of the terrace system, partly from the desiccation of the soils resulting from irresponsible tillage and lack of manure, . . . partly from the destruction of the irrigation systems, partly from deforestation, partly from the lack of safety caused by wandering Bedouin. (*HHL*, 22; fig. 18)



Figure 18: Abandoned and eroded terraces at Silwad, north of Ramallah. This was actually a flourishing vineyard until hit by a blight decades ago. The Israeli occupation has made its restoration very difficult.¹¹

The towns and villages of Palestine had had a post-Biblical history of prosperity and a recent revival of sorts triggered by the Ottoman Tanzimat reforms of the 1840s, and had he actually interviewed the local residents of the “hovels,” he would have heard very different explanations of the agricultural decline and denudation and might have imagined a redevelopment involving local inhabitants rather

11. Abdulfattah and de Vries, “The State of Agricultural Terraces,” 143ff.

than the “rescue” by Europeans through more intense colonization by “Westerners.”

<p>Impressions of the native population</p> <p>STEREOTYPES</p> <p>“...verarmde Bosniakken en omdoolende Bedoeinen wier begrippen van gastvrijheid niet bijster hoog staan” (<i>HHL</i>, p. 87; on the journey between Haifa and Jaffa)</p> <p>“...omveiligheid die de omtrekkende Bedoeinen veroorzaken” (<i>HHL</i>, p. 22)</p> <p>“Die inheemsche Mohammedaansche bevolking weet zich niet tot hooger bestaansniveau op te werken” (<i>HHL</i>, p. 98)</p> <p>ORIENTALISM</p> <p>“de Oostersche besmeurheid en vervallenheid” (<i>HHL</i>, p. 71)</p> <p>“de in Azie inheemsche neiging tot sexueele orgieen” (<i>OOW</i> p. 27)</p> <p>BUT: “het sexueele kwaad, dat ook in Europa en Amerika woelt” (same page)</p>	 <p>Chailk Bedouin Bedouin-Schick BEDOEINEN-SJEICH Beduin Sheik</p>
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Figure 19: A Bedouin sheikh in front of his tent, proud of his son and traditional culture artifacts.

The Miserable Inhabitants of “the Accursed” Land

Kuyper’s impressions of the local people are rooted in a stark set of contrasts between western and eastern people that is best captured by his characterization of eastern Christians’ tendency for infighting: “Now we are cool-headed Westerners [*koele Westerlingen*], but the Easterner is so much more hot-tempered [*heetgebakkerd*]” (*OOW*, 537). The following snippets are representative of his general assessment of these “hot-tempered” Easterners (fig. 19):

... impoverished Bosniaks and homeless Bedouin whose concepts of hospitality are not very lofty.... (*HHL*, 87)

... lack of security caused by the wandering Bedouin.... (*HHL*, 22)

This native Mohammdan populace does not know how to raise itself to a higher economic status (i.e., pull itself up by its bootstraps). (*HHL*, 98)

... the eastern filthiness and immiseration. . . . (*HHL*, 71)

... the Asiatic native proclivity toward sexual orgies. . . . (*OOW*, 27; but note also this remark on the same page: "... the sexual evil that also rages in Europe and America. . . .")

Kuyper evaluated people he observed in terms of their potential for enterprise and economic development. He therefore judged farm communities by their neatness and productivity, towns and cities by the robustness of their trade and industry, and the vitality of communities by demographics. Thus local people did not measure up to his Dutch standards of cleanliness and enterprise. Conversely, he was not much interested in cultural achievements by themselves, and as a result, he missed the rich visual culture of Palestine evident both in traditional town architecture and artistically pleasing weaving and embroidery which were marks of Palestinian historic identity.¹² Others, as Noordtzijs demonstrates with the photo album used in this article, were much more captivated by the beauty and dignity of the material culture of Palestine's countryside and townscapes.

The “Empty” Land Ripe for Colonization

As the quotations indicate, he considered these flaws inherent and irreversible, and thus the redemption of the land required an influx of colonists and settlers who met his western requirements of neatness and enterprise:

The native inhabitants do not give evidence of any robust initiative whatsoever. . . . If, therefore, the expectations of those who look forward to a better economic future for Palestine are to be fulfilled, such an improved future must be realized by shoving the Bedouin back to the East, and through the entry of an international mixture of colonists, who would form the foundation for an entirely fresh repopulation of Palestine. (*OOW*, 445; fig. 20)

12. See www.arabheritage.org for late 19th century textiles, weaving, and embroidery that are emblematic of Palestinians' distinctive cultural identity today.

This contrast between the “locals” (*inheemschen*) and colonists is stated repeatedly and emphatically.



Figure 20: Women at the well or carrying water were favorite subjects of early painters and photographers.

His investigation of the following colonial settlements was the substantial “business” component of his visit to Palestine: the four German Templar colonies, the major Jewish colonies, and the American Colony (founded by Anna Spafford). The settlers were all foreigners from the west, and he found each an economic success. What he says of the German colony at Haifa is typical:

What one notices most particularly about Haifa is the contrast between the German Colony and the native portion of the populace. . . . These five-hundred colonists live communally in a separate area, and all that you see there is sturdily constructed, looks well maintained, and gives a pleasant impression of order and neatness; a small western oasis in the midst of Eastern filth and neglect. (*HHL*, 71; fig. 21)

Kuyper was also very interested in the ports: Haifa, at the head of the Hauran railroad; and Jaffa, which served as the port of

Jerusalem. For they enabled the export of goods and produce from the colonies. He also tended to favor the strong administration of imperial organization, which in this case helped the trade infrastructure flourish. (Recall his explanation for the flowering of the ancient Hauran as due to “the strict Roman administration.”) He therefore tended to treat Ottoman Turkish provincial administrators with respect and sought them out for interviews—but also because he liked the company of elites.

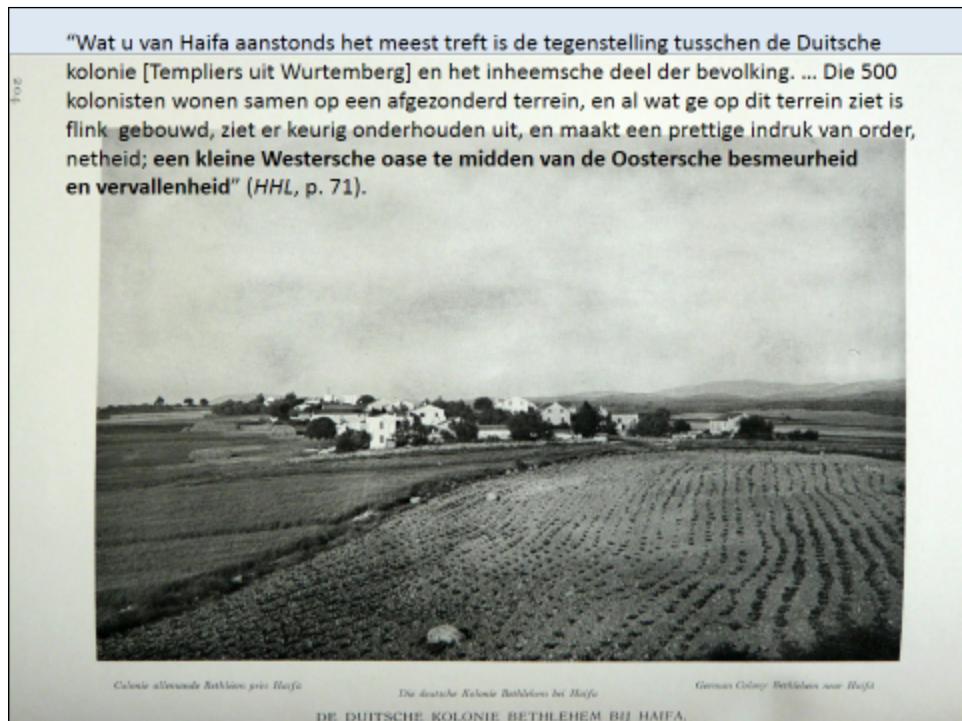
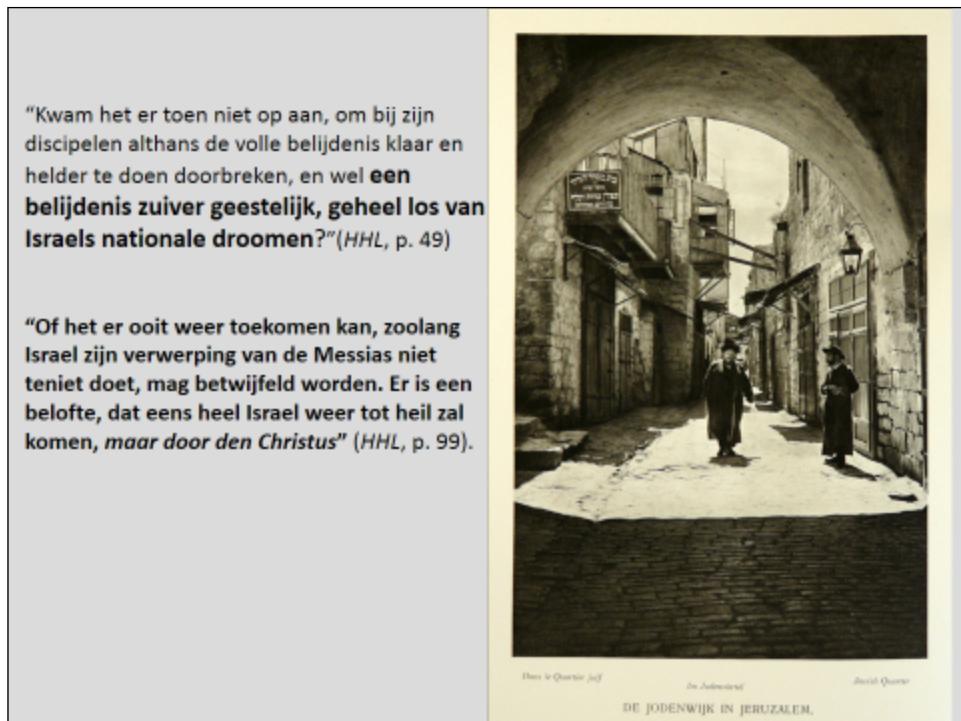


Figure 21: The German Colony at Haifa set in its agricultural fields.

Jewish Colonies and the Zionist Enterprise

Kuyper was emphatically uninterested in religious Zionism because he had such a strong sense of the spiritual, non-national outcome of God’s promises in the incarnation of Jesus that there simply was no room for it; therefore, his sacrilizing of the places of the incarnation could not link up with a Zionist theology of the Messiah’s return as it did for Christian dispensationalists. At Capernaum, reflecting on the aftermath of the Sermon on the Mount, he re-

marked, “Didn’t it come to this then, that he would expose the full confession—clear and transparent—to his disciples, and that surely a purely spiritual confession, totally free of Israel’s dreams of nationhood” (*HHL*, 49; fig. 22)? And even more emphatically: “Whether this could ever happen again, as long as Israel does not put aside its rejection of the Messiah, may be doubted. There is a promise that eventually all Israel will be saved, *but through the Christ*” (*HHL*, 99; fig. 22).



“Kwam het er toen niet op aan, om bij zijn discipelen althans de volle belijdenis klaar en helder te doen doorbreken, en wel een belijdenis zuiver geestelijk, geheel los van Israels nationale dromen?” (*HHL*, p. 49)

“Of het er ooit weer toekomen kan, zolang Israel zijn verwerping van de Messias niet teniet doet, mag betwijfeld worden. Er is een belofte, dat eens heel Israel weer tot heil zal komen, maar door den Christus” (*HHL*, p. 99).

Figure 22: Walking the streets of Jerusalem
in typical east European Jewish dress.

He could well have agreed with the more secular Zionist agenda of his day in the spirit of which Israel Zangwill wrote in 1902, “Palestine has but a small population of Arabs and fellahin and wandering, lawless, blackmailing bedouin tribes.” And the phrase

he made famous: “restore the country without a people to a people without a country.”¹³



Figure 23: Prayers at the Western Wall.

Note that Zangwill shared Kuyper’s biases against the local population and its psychology. In the minds of both thinkers the land was empty and available because these indigenes were outside the focal range of their vision. Therefore, the land was not really deserted but “empty” in the sense that it was ripe for colonization by those who were industrious and orderly rather than blackmailing and wandering. The difference was, however, that Zangwill was designating Jews as exclusively “the people without land” whereas Kuyper considered the European Jews as part of a larger cohort of western colonists who qualified by being industrious and energetic; in that cohort there was room for Jews too. This means that he was not particularly Zionist, but not unsympathetic nor opposed to sec-

13. *English Illustrated Magazine* 221 (Feb. 1902): 421–30.

ular Zionism. And, like Theodor Herzl, and later also Zangwill, he did not consider the land of Palestine to be the only or best location for the fulfillment of the Jewish national dream.

Kuyper discussed the larger role of the Jews in his long chapter elsewhere in his travel book (“*Het Joodsche Probleem*,” in *OOD*, 239–324), but here he merely includes them in his economic evaluation of the colonization of Palestine. Though Bratt notes that in this larger chapter he taps into some typical anti-Semitic stereotypes,¹⁴ here he shows no traces of anti-Semitism. Rather, he displays considerable sympathy for Jewish prayers and mourning at the Western Wall: “You have to have seen the Jews at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem in order to understand this languid homesickness and this national mourning” (*HHL*, 92; fig. 23). Nevertheless, he denied that the Zionist objective of nationhood could succeed on the coattails of successful colonization: “Even though you presuppose, as I do eagerly, that a modestly paced colonization of Palestine and environs can make gradual progress, Zionism cannot expect to celebrate its triumph thereby” (*OOD*, 275).

Missions in “*Het Heilige Land*”: Western Missions and Eastern Christianity

The Christian colonies, three German and one American, which he judged successful at economic development, he declared to be failures as missions (*HHL*, 101–11). This negative evaluation fit his general thinking that the evangelization of Muslims was to be seen as a dead-end: “It is not feasible to think of missionaries’ impact in terms of conversion [from Islam] to Christendom” (*HHL*, 26; fig. 24).

Needless to say this left classic nineteenth-century missionaries, who were seriously drawn to Palestine, with a problem that they have not yet solved. Kuyper’s solution was frank and practical: “The missionary venture in Palestine has therefore no other meaning than to bring the Christian sector already found there up to a higher level” (*HHL*, 26; fig. 25).

14. Abraham Kuyper, 330.



Figure 24: Graffiti on a shop door in the Old City of Jerusalem.
It reads: *al-Masiah, Nour el-Alim*; “The Messiah, Light of the World.”

My hindsight observation is that this was a correct assessment. While many western denominations have churches in Palestine and Jordan, most of their members were already Christians whose families “converted” from an eastern to a western denomination.

What Kuyper Could Not Have Seen nor Thought

Although Kuyper is known as an innovator and founder of a tradition of revived Dutch Calvinism, what he saw and thought in Palestine belonged to the religio-political culture of his day. We should therefore not be too surprised at his attitudes and interpretations. Most western visitors, including archaeologists, imagined Palestine more in terms of the Biblical passages and Sunday school lessons from which they had learned its geography. Not all shared his enthusiasm for the holy places, however.



Figure 25: Tile in Armenian Orthodox Church,
Armenian Quarter, Old City, Jerusalem

A Dutch Jewish business man who toured Syria-Palestine in 1907 for the express purpose of inquiring into the business aspect of the secular Zionist colonization project did not share Kuyper's enthusiasm for the sacred places, not because he could not share his faith in the incarnation, but because of the corrupt commercialization he witnessed. He remarked:

Meanwhile, I have to observe frankly that Jerusalem's holiness is also Jerusalem's downfall. The holy sites are being exploited as wellsprings of profit, the love of the Holy land [*het Heilige land*] has become an object of business speculation, and there is trade in relics and in goods for use in the churches. Spirituality often becomes a mixture of worship, trade, and politics.¹⁵

Nevertheless, had the two met, they would have agreed on a lot involving planning for economic development and colonization

15. J. H. Kann, *Erets Israel, het joodsche land* (Leiden: Brill, 1908), 22–23 (my translation).

from their shared location in the European colony-founding empires. The dark thoughts Joseph Conrad expressed in *Heart of Darkness*, also published in 1905, were neither Kuyper's nor Kann's thoughts.



Figure 26: Jerusalem, looking west from the Mount of Olives.

Looking back at what Kuyper saw and thought is naturally biased by what we now know but Kuyper could not have known. That awareness should blunt our criticism when we are shocked by his enthusiasms for sacred soil, for his orientalist biases, and for his colonialist notions. Were Kuyper to come to Israel-Palestine today, what would he see and think while standing on the Mount of Olives looking west across Jerusalem at the skyline of the western, Israeli city (fig. 26)? I'll leave the answer to your flights of imagination. But as our minds soar we should ask how much of what *we* see in or think about Palestine-Israel was inherited from Abraham Kuyper and his contemporaries a century ago. My answer is: a great deal, even though things may not have turned out the way Kuyper would have hoped during his 1905 pilgrimage-tour. And what Kuyper and

his contemporaries thought in 1905 certainly influenced the transformation of Palestine as he saw it to the Israel-Palestine we can see today.