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THE PROMISE OF THE LAND TO ISRAEL

Elmer A. Martens*

Since the state of Israel came into existence in 1948 not a few Bible interpreters have been anxious to show that this development was a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. Others argued that the Old Testament statements about Israel and land had been fulfilled earlier or through the New Testament church. In this view, the inauguration of the state of Israel was of no greater significance than the establishment of the United States in 1776 or of Canada in 1867.¹ Other Bible expositors, more cautious, took positions between these extremes.

This article will focus on relevant biblical land promises, discuss common but dubious argumentation, and call attention to key considerations that affect the answer to the question of how we are to understand the promises of land made to Israel. The issue is too large and the space too limited for the question herewith to be resolved forevermore. In any case, the historical fact of modern day Israel and the statements of Scripture demand of believers careful thought and reflection.

RELEVANT DATA

Several facts should be reviewed as basic data. The promise of a given territory was made both to Abraham, an individual, and to Israel, a people. The promise of land given to Abraham was reiterated to other patriarchs. God declared, "To your descendants I have given this land from the River of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates" (Genesis 15:18, NAS). Elsewhere Abraham was told that the land of Canaan was to be an everlasting possession for his descendants (Gen. 17:8a). At the time of the exodus of the bonded people, God announced his purpose to fulfill his promise to Abraham. "I will bring you to the land which I swore to give Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and I will give it to you for a possession" (Ex. 6:8; see Deut. 1:7-8). The land was linked with a promise, partly because another promise, that of many descendants, required territory. The land was a gift, a land of milk and honey. The people under Joshua possessed the land but after several centuries were driven from it.

A second fact is that the promise was made again to people who lost the land. Amos, the eighth century prophet who told of the impending judgment, ended with a hopeful note that Israel "will not again be rooted out from their

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land" (Amos 9:15). Later, in the exile, Ezekiel declared, "I will bring you into the land of Israel" (Ezek. 37:12; see 11:14-21; 20:39-44; 36:16-36). Restoration to the land for Israel was of significance theologically in that such action was to vindicate Yahweh and bring nations to an acknowledgment of him (Ezek. 36:16 ff.).

A third fact is that the New Testament is largely silent on the subject of land. Jesus said that the meek should inherit the earth (Mt. 5:5). The writer to the Hebrews spoke about a symbolic interpretation of land and in Revelation John told about godly ones who shall rule upon the earth (Rev. 5:10). This relative silence on the subject of land is the more surprising because, statistically, "land" is the fourth most frequently occurring noun in the Old Testament. Land is mentioned 311 times in Genesis, 197 times in Deuteronomy, 271 times in Jeremiah, and 290 times in Ezekiel, and in all of the Old Testament 2,504 times.

SOME QUESTIONABLE ARGUMENTATION

The promises of land to Israel have been used both to make too much and too little of Israel's return in 1948. Certain debatable aspects in some of these arguments should be identified.

It is sometimes held that Israel must return to the land because of the statement to Abraham that his descendants should possess the land *forever*. Before subscribing to this argument, one should note that in fulfillment of the promise Israel did indeed possess the land (see Neh. 9:7-8). Loss of the land raises an initial question about the meaning of "forever." The Hebrew word (*'olam*) means "a long or indefinite time" either past or future. Achish believed that David would serve him forever (*'olam*), which meant during David's lifetime (I Sam. 27:12). Since the philosophical meaning of "without end" is not necessarily a part of the Hebrew word, some have translated *'olam* with "in perpetuity." Moreover, crucial to our handling of such promises as the promise of land to Abraham is the following statement, "I did indeed say that your house and the house of your father should walk before me forever; but now the Lord declares, 'Far be it from me . . .'" (I Sam. 2:30-31). There is a conditional aspect to the promises of God—a fact which interpreters of prophecy have too often overlooked. Bible interpreters must go with Jeremiah and learn the lesson of conditionality taught at the potter's wheel (Jer. 18:1-12). The promise for restoration to the land that was issued in the exile was not given—strange as it may seem—on the basis of God's promise to Abraham. A careful check of Jeremiah and Ezekiel will show that though the land is identified as the land promised to Abraham, that promise itself is never the basis for the restoration. It will not do for a Bible reader to seize on Genesis 17:8 and point in a direct line to 1948 as its fulfillment.

It is distressing to see the exuberance in certain quarters over the existence of the state of Israel, together with a blind support of Israeli policies, without any regard to the Old Testament requirement of righteousness and justice. Right conduct, and not bare prediction alone, determine occupancy of the land (Ezek. 33:23-29). It is unfaithfulness to the biblical text to close one's eyes to the injustices of present-day Israel while extolling Israel's possession of the land as the sure fulfillment of prophecy. Even if the claim were true, loyalty to the biblical message requires insistence on justice and honorable relationships.

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A second dubious argument is that Israel's possession of land is a necessary sign for Christ's second coming. Such a position is problematic in view of Christ's assertion that no one knows the hour of his coming. To draw on the parable of the fig tree for support is to over-interpret the parable, for the belief that the fig tree is Israel is an inference (Mk. 13:28).² To say that Jesus' word, "This generation will not pass away until all these things take place" (Mt. 24:34) means that the generation which sees the restoration of Israel to the land will also see the second coming of Christ is to ignore evidence from other contexts on the use of "this generation" and to set aside the more likely interpretation that Jesus referred to his coming in judgment to the destruction of Jerusalem (70 A.D.). On what basis, one is forced to ask, are the predictions by Jesus all necessarily predictions of the end times? Furthermore is it not strange that the end times are so frequently identified with the age in which the interpreter lives?

At the opposite pole, a questionable line of reasoning is advanced by those who hold that Israel's twentieth century statehood is not to be linked in any way with the Bible promise. Among their claims is that in the New Testament period territorial sacrality is eliminated. All territory everywhere is to be treated with conscientious stewardship as sacred.³ But can the Old Testament promises of land to Israel be set aside even if the universalizing of land be admitted? Such universalizing of land need not invalidate the particular and special meaning of the land for Israel. Whether it accords with our twentieth century notions of egalitarianism or not, the fact is that God has designed a particular people, the Jews, living in a designated territory, Palestine, to be the carrier of his revelation. True, the fullest revelation is in Christ. The focus now is on good news, the gospel, not land. But, as will be argued below, God's program for Israel, including its land, was not thereby made inoperative.

Furthermore, the silence of the New Testament about land promise is not conclusive evidence in support of those who hold that land is not a factor in the New Testament era. There are some good reasons for New Testament silence on this point. The church is not territorially bound, so that the land question would not be pressing for the church. A further reason for the silence on land promises in the New Testament may be that they were so well established in the Old Testament that repetition of them was unnecessary. The lack of New Testament emphasis on God's people's involvements in social structures or the brief allusions to God's work in the history of nations in the New Testament does not subtract from the enduring validity of these Old Testament statements. It is not for us to set the New Testament against the Old. Both are the Word of God. The relative silence of the New Testament on Israel's regathering cannot be used to say that the earlier promises are subsumed in the church.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR AN ASSESSMENT OF LAND

If one can find fault with either extreme, does that not leave the interpreter on the fence when facing the question of the significance of the land promises to Israel? No, such a critique means that the answer derives from settling prior questions, two of which are the relationship of Israel to the Church and the method of Bible interpretation.

Is the church the successor to Israel in the sense that Israel is eliminated as a further consideration in God's program? The majority of present-day

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scholars would answer "yes."⁴ Their case is quite persuasive, but as of now I am unable to join this majority for these reasons: First, God's initiation of the church need not bring to an end his program with Israel, just as his selection of Abraham did not terminate God's program with the world at large (Gen. 1-11).

Secondly, Jesus and Paul see a place for future Israel. The apostles are to judge the twelve tribes of Israel (Mt. 19:28). Israel is a continuing national unit according to Romans (cf. 11:1, 5, 12, 15-16, 23-27). Paul adds that the promises of God are irrevocable (Rom. 11:29). While some dispute the point, a recent dissertation convinces me that the New Testament does not equate Israel and the church. The equation was first made by Justin in 160 A.D. The problematic passage in Galatians 6:16 is not to be understood as Israel becoming another name for church, but, in line with a rabbinic benediction, is to be understood according to the following paraphrase: "May God give peace to all who will walk according to this criterion, and mercy also to his faithful people Israel."⁵

Thirdly, there is a surplus of promise of the Old Testament to Israel, even when it is recognized that fulfillment occurs in part in the New Testament. These promises are for an earthly possession of the land by Israel. While, as noted above, the return in 538 B.C. represented a partial fulfillment of these promises, the statements of promise were too elaborate to have been fulfilled in the years after 538 B.C. As van Ruler puts it, "There is a surplus in the Old Testament . . . that cannot be fitted into New Testament fulfillment."⁶

Finally, a strong statement in Jeremiah 31:31, in which God in oath binds himself that as long as heaven and earth remain Israel shall continue, corroborates with other considerations the enduring entity of Israel not only as a nation, but as a people with whom God continues his work.

A second consideration in answering the question of the promise of land to Israel lies in the method of interpreting Scripture. Oversimplified, perhaps, the matter has been outlined as a choice between reading literally or figuratively. Let it be said at once that the New Testament cites the Old Testament sometimes "as being literally fulfilled . . . sometimes New Testament cites Old Testament in an expanded typological sense."⁷ The place of Christ's birth was Bethlehem according to Micah 5:2—a fulfillment of the literal type. However, even so called literalists do not take Biblical statements in every case as literal (e.g., "He shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel," Gen. 3:15; "Many bulls have surrounded me; Strong bulls of Bashan have encircled me" (Ps. 22:12).

Undeniably, there is also a figurative sense of fulfillment. Amos promised that the fallen booth of David will be raised up—a passage which James applied to the mystery of the church now composed of both Gentiles and Jews (Acts 15:15 ff.) One can agree with Lehman that here is a striking illustration of the New Testament "imbu[ing] it [Old Testament] with far greater spiritual meaning than appears on the surface of the Old."⁸ The ingathering of God's people, "I will bring your offspring from the east, and gather you from the west . . ." (Isaiah 43:5 ff.) is applied by Jesus in a transforming sense in terms of the kingdom of God (Lk. 13:29; Mt. 8:11). These examples suggest that neither literalist nor spiritualizer can marshal all the evidence in his favor.

Added to this Biblical datum is the variety of usage of the word

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“fulfillment.” One usage is the common one of fitting an action with an earlier prediction. A second usage of the term is akin to our term “completion.” When Jesus spoke of himself as fulfilling the law, he meant that he was taking the law to its proper extension and conclusion. A third way of using “fulfillment” is in the sense of counterpart. This usage presupposes a view of history in which, cycle-like, an event of one period is comparable to an event in another time. Thus Hosea 11:1 tells of Israel’s departure from Egypt but is referred to by Matthew as having a fulfillment—not in the sense that Hosea 11:1 was prediction—but in the sense that a comparable event, a counterpart event, has happened in the coming of Jesus out of Egypt (Mt. 2:15).⁹

How do these considerations about Israel and about the nature of interpretation bear on the Old Testament promises of land to Israel? Since the New Testament employs a figurative interpretation of land in which land functions as a symbol of a Christian’s rest in Christ (Heb. 3:18-4:11), one wonders whether the other aspects of the promised land such as prosperity, abundance, and peace are not likewise to be focused for the believer in the person of Christ. One is led to question whether the impact of land, a symbol for all that is good, is not regarded as finding its counterpart for the believer in the person of Christ, who stands for all that is desirable. And one wonders whether the numerous “in Christ” statements of the New Testament are deliberately an echo of “in the land” of the Old Testament.

Indeed, a recent scholar who traces the motif of land from the Old Testament into the New speaks about the “spiritualizing” or “transcendentalizing” of land in the New Testament and notes that “for the holiness of space, Christianity has fundamentally, though not consistently, substituted the holiness of the Person: it has Christified holy space.”¹⁰ This means that I as a Christian relate to the land promise in this way: with regard to land, Israel understood that God’s intentions for them were to do them good and that he wanted them to enjoy the good life. As a Christian, I hear Jesus echoing that intention when he says, “I came that they might have life, and might have it abundantly” (Jn. 10:10).

However, general usage of Old Testament material does not allow us to say dogmatically that this figurative usage exhausts the Old Testament promise. We must open the possibility of the historical restoration of Israel to the land. As indicated above, the strong statements of a return with a display of power (Is. 51:9-11; Ezek. 37:25-28) seem to call for such a return.¹¹ Despite the conditional nature of the promises in the Old Testament, the life stories of Abraham and others argue for a position that that which God intends and begins he brings to pass despite human weakness and sin. Now we need not interpret such restoration as a sign of Christ’s coming, nor need restoration bring new revelation. The person of Christ is God’s final revelation. But just as the destruction of Jerusalem came as a fulfillment of prediction (though after Christ) so it should not be surprising subsequently to find a restoration of Israel to the land in history in fulfillment of a promise. Regardless of the eventual destiny of the Israeli state (and one must be prepared for the judgment of God on it as on other nations who violate God’s call to righteousness), 1948 is a remarkable fact in middle east history. For “remarkable” one might even substitute “miraculous.”

Attempts at calendaring should be avoided. The error of the first century should be sufficient warning. Those who had it best figured out missed Christ’s

coming simply because he did not come in accord with their calculations. Much writing on prophecy is suspiciously like the strange exegesis of the Qumran people (100 B.C.) or smacks of Millerite exposition of the nineteenth century.

But while warning against excess claims, I think it likely that God's program with the Jews is not yet concluded and that 1948 and the Israeli state hold more than average significance in the fulfillment pattern.

NOTES

1. Opposite opinions were expounded by two conservatives: Wilbur Smith holds to an earthly future for Israel; Oswald Allis does not. *Christianity Today*, Vol. I (Dec. 24, 1956), p. 6 ff.
2. "The fig tree was a recognized symbol of Israel (cf. 11:14) but there is no indication that the reference here has an intended symbolic meaning." D. E. Hiebert, *Mark: A Portrait of the Servant*, Chicago: Moody Press, 1974, p. 329.
3. Waldemar Janzen, "Geography of Faith: A Christian Perspective on the Meaning of Places," *Studies in Religion*, Vol. 3 (1973).
4. To cite one Mennonite Brethren: C. Wall, "The Restoration of Israel," unpublished Master's thesis, Princeton University, 1948. Available at Tabor College Library, Hillsboro, Kansas, and Hiebert Library, Fresno, Calif.
5. Peter Richardson, *Israel in the Apostolic Church*, Cambridge: University Press, 1969, p. 84.
6. A. A. van Ruler, *The Christian Church and the Old Testament*, translated by G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971), p. 45.
7. Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970, pp. 243, 247.
8. C. K. Lehman, *Biblical Theology*, Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1971, p. 280.
9. For a discussion of forms of fulfillment see C.F.D. Moule, "Fulfillment Words in the New Testament: Use or Abuse?" *New Testament Studies* 14, (April, 1968), pp. 293-320.
10. W. D. Davies, *The Gospel and the Land: Early Christianity and Jewish Territorial Doctrine*, Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1974, p. 368.
11. For a forceful presentation supporting such "openness" see the article by the Dutch Reformed theologian, H. Berkhof, "Israel as a Theological Problem in the Christian Church," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, Vol. 6 (1969), pp. 329-347. "We believe that in one way or another we have to consider them [Israel] as the other half of God's people." (p. 337, italics his). ". . . many prophecies were fulfilled in Christ, but they never apply this expression to the promises of the land." (p. 341)