

God's Plan for Israel

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Our century has witnessed the phenomenal rise of the state of Israel in the Middle East. A multitude of questions of great importance are raised by these extraordinary events. The claim of the land of Canaan by Jews after almost two millennia of existence in the diaspora seeks a hearing. Indeed, the issue of the right of national existence and the fixing of national borders is a matter of world peace.

An intricate factor in the minds of thinking people is the applicability of biblical promises made to ancient Israel and their relevance for modern Israel. What was and is God's plan as expressed in the repeated promises concerning the possession of the land of Canaan and its repossession? Have these predictions and promises been fulfilled? Or are they in the process of being fulfilled today? Is there any condition connected with them or are they of an unconditional nature? These and other questions beg for careful Scriptural answers. What is the testimony of Scripture?

1. The Promise of the Land

God's plan for Israel as outlined in the Hebrew Bible is comprehensive and broad. We are forced to narrow the focus to one key issue: The divine promises regarding the possession of the land.

The pivotal call statement in Genesis 12:1-3 contains the divine imperative to Abraham: "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you" (vs. 1). [1] In unquestioned obedience Abraham leaves Ur (11:31) and subsequently Haran (12:4-5) "to go to the land of Canaan" (vs. 5). Once he had arrived in the land of Canaan, the Lord appeared to Abram at Shechem and promised, "To your descendants I will give this land" (vs. 7). The divine promise that the "seed" (*zera c*) of Abraham, i.e. his "descendants," [2] will receive the land promised to them is one of the key themes of the Bible.

After the peaceful separation between Lot and Abraham the Lord asks Abraham, "Lift up your eyes, . . . for all the land which you see I will give to you and to your descendants for ever" (Gen 13:14-15). [3] In his subsequent covenant with Abraham (Gen 15:7-21) [4] the Lord obligates Himself by divine oath [5] to give "you this land to possess" (vs. 7). The covenant promise, "To your descendants I will give this land" is reaffirmed in verse 18. [6] It appears repeatedly as secured by God's oath (Gen 24:7; 50:24; Exod 33:1; Num 10:29; 11:12; Deut 1:8; 11:21; 31:23). In the second stage of the covenant with Abraham the Lord emphasizes,

"And I will give to you and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God" (Gen 17:8).

The promise of the land is repeated to Abraham's son Isaac (Gen 26:3) who passes it on to his son Jacob (Gen 28:4). Subsequently Jacob himself hears God say, "The land which I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and I will give the land to your descendants after you" (Gen 35:12) "for an everlasting possession" (Gen 48:4). The book of Genesis closes with Joseph's deathbed words that epitomized the hope based on the Lord God's repeated promise, which had the guarantee of being an everlasting covenant (Gen 15:17) and nothing less than God's own oath (Gen 15:7): [7] "I am about to die; but God will visit you, and bring you up out of this land to the land which he swore to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob," (50:24). Here the covenant promise of the land is welded over again into God's special plan for Israel, a plan that was to be fulfilled in the future. Possession of the land was promised to the patriarchs, the forefathers of Israel. For a time "they themselves were already living in the land, to be sure, but were not yet in possession of it, that is, the promise was not yet fulfilled." [8] The promise was to move on to fulfillment.

2. The Time of Fulfillment

Divine mercy is manifested in the revelation to Abraham about the time element as regards the fulfillment of the possession of the Promised Land. One of the pivotal sayings of the Old Testament discloses to the father of the Israelites that God's patience towards the inhabitants of the Promised Land is extended, [9] because "the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete" (Gen 15:16). Furthermore, Abraham's descendants will be oppressed and serve as slaves for "four hundred years" (vs. 13). It should be noted parenthetically that there is no conflict between the figure of "four hundred years" and "the fourth generation" (vs. 16) since the term "generation" is *dôr* and can mean "duration, time-span, lifetime," [10] of which a hundred years is a conservative equivalent in the patriarchal context. [11] This long delay in the fulfillment of the promise is part of the plan of the God who directs all history toward his appointed goal.

The time of fulfillment of the promise began during the days of Moses and Joshua. The book of Exodus recounts the preparation of Moses as deliverer of Israel, the deliverance, the covenant on Mt. Sinai, the wilderness wanderings, instructions for the tabernacle, apostasy and the renewal of the covenant. Moses' farewell speeches are recorded in the book of Deuteronomy. The great leader reminds the people of Israel of the divine command, "Behold, I have set the land

before you; go in and take possession of the land . . ." (Deut 1:8). It is then recounted how they took possession of the Transjordanian territory of the Amorite kings of Heshbon and Bashan (Deut 2:26-3:11; cf. Num 21:21-35). Before his death Moses installed Joshua as his successor (Deut 34:9). Moses had been forbidden to lead the people of Israel into the land beyond the Jordan (Num 20:12).

The death of Moses signaled the conquest of the Promised Land (Josh 1:1-9). The miraculous crossing of the Jordan was the visible token of God's constant presence and His purpose in giving them the Promised Land (Josh 3:1-17). By the time when Joshua's death approached (Josh 23:1, 14) the Lord had given to Israel "all the land which he swore to give to their fathers; and having taken possession of it, they settled there. . . . Not one of the good promises which the Lord had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass" (21:43, 45; cf. 23:14). Although a "remnant of these nations" (Josh 23:12) were still among them, they were so powerless that they proved no threat to Israel, so long as the Israelites adhered faithfully to their God (Josh 23:11-13).

Notwithstanding that sections of the country remained in the hands of pagan nations (Josh 13:1-6), the promises had been fulfilled, for God had not promised the immediate destruction of the Canaanites but their gradual extermination (Exod 23:29-30; Deut 7:22; cf. Judg 2:1-2; 3:1-2; 2 Kgs 17:17-18). The Almighty acted in a way consistent with his own nature and started to fulfill His promise. Still the question haunts the student of the Word of God, Has the promise of the land found its complete fulfillment? An answer can only be found if the territorial extent of the Promised Land can be determined with some degree of certainty.

3. The Extent of the Promised Land

The land promised to the patriarchs and their descendants is commonly identified as "the land of Canaan" (cf. Gen 12:5; 17:8; Exod 6:4; Lev 25:38; Deut 32:49) [12] which seems to refer generally to Syria-Palestine, [13] the country west of the Jordan but it may also be Bashan to the east. [14] The familiar idiom "from Dan to Beer-sheba" (Judg 20:1; 1 Sam 3:20) is a general description of a later time used of the extent of the land from north to south.

Genesis 15:18-21 contains the first of the most extensive descriptions of the Promised Land. It is to extend "from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kennizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the

Jebusites." The southern border of the Promised Land is "the river of Egypt." "Normally, this phrase designates the Nile." [15] The northeastern border is "the river Euphrates." Thus the Promised Land is to encompass the territory from the Euphrates in the north-east, "the entrance of Hamath" (Num 34:8; cf. Ezek 47:15; 48:1) in the north (which is still not clearly identified), [16] the Great Sea, that is, the Mediterranean in the west (Num 34:6; Josh 15:4; cf. Ezek 47:28), the River of Egypt (Gen 15:18) or the Brook of Egypt (Num 34:5; Josh 15:4, 47) [17] respectively in the south, and the wilderness (Exod 23:31; Deut 11:24; Josh 1:4) in the east. [18] On the basis of these descriptions the Promised Land seems to include the territory of both Transjordan and Cisjordan from the Nile to the Euphrates (Exod 23:31; Deut 1:6-8; Josh 1:2-4).

We can now return to the burning question concerning the complete fulfillment of the promise of the land. During the times of Joshua and the Judges no complete fulfillment is witnessed. The Israelites were at the height of their expansion in the time of David. His realm extended from Labo-hamath and the Lebanese border in the north (2 Sam 8:1-18; 10:1-19; etc.) to the Brook of Egypt in the south, from the desert in the east (1 Chr 19:1-19) to the Mediterranean on the west. About Solomon it is said that he "ruled over all the kingdoms from the Euphrates to the land of the Philistines and to the border of Egypt" (1 Kgs 4:21; Heb 5:1), that is the Brook of Egypt (1 Kgs 8:65). This is as close a fulfillment as the Old Testament knows. However, the victories of David did not make the land of all of these nations his or Solomon's own land. The defeated nations were reduced to tribute paying vassals (1 Kgs 4:21 [Heb 5:1]) or made into a forced levy of slaves (1 Kgs 9:21; 2 Chr 8:7-8). Nothing is known about Israel ever establishing control of the territory clear south to the Nile or to incorporate the cities of Tyre and Sidon, which were allocated to Asher (Josh 19:28-29; Judg 1:31). It is evident, then, that the land promised to the patriarchs was never completely fulfilled. Why not?

4. The Condition of the Fulfillment

There is a tension between Joshua 21:43-45, which speaks of a fulfillment of the promise of the Lord, and the fact that a complete fulfillment has not come about. How is this tension to be resolved? Did God fail to live up to His promise? Did he go back on His oath? As far as God was concerned "not one of all the good promises . . . had failed" (Josh 21:45). Israel's God had kept His word. But His promise and oath can find its full and complete fulfillment only when Israel is obedient to God's will and law.

The discrepancy between the promise and its complete fulfillment does not rest in a lack on the part of the divine promise or God's ability and word, but in the

lacking obedience on the part of Israel. [19] "The complete fulfillment of the promise was inseparably connected with the fidelity of Israel to the Lord." [20] Israel was from the start in a state of disobedience. "They have done what is evil in my sight . . . , since the day their fathers came out of Egypt" (2 Kgs 21:15; cf. Deut 1:26).

The unfaithfulness of Israel caused the promise of God to slip from their hands. God did not fail; his people failed. They failed to fulfill the conditions on the basis of which they could experience the fullness of the divine promise. A common misconception considers the covenant promise of the land made to Abraham as unilateral [21] and unconditional. [22] It is correct that the first stage of covenant-making (Gen 15:7-18) does not spell out how Abraham is to behave, but the second stage (Gen 17:1-27) clearly spells out that Abraham and his descendants are to "keep" the covenant (vss. 9-10 and that there are obligations that one can "break" (vs. 14).

Abraham's obedience in not withholding his son keeps the promise functioning (Gen 22:16-18). Because Abraham "obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws" (Gen 26:5), the Lord will fulfill his oath and give to his descendants "all these lands" (vs. 3). Abraham is not the recipient of the promise of the land because of his obedience; [23] his obedience, on the contrary, keeps the promise active. Without loyalty to God, the promise of the land cannot be fulfilled. The promise of the land is conditional.

The condition of the fulfillment of the inheritance of the Promised Land is obedience to the Lord. Those who despise the Lord shall not see the Promised Land (Num 14:34); those who refuse to follow the Lord wholly share the same fate (Num 32:11-12; Deut 1:35-36).

By rebellion the Israelites would forfeit the blessings and experience the curses of the Lord (Deut 11:26-31). They would even be dispossessed of the Promised Land (Deut 28:63-68; cf. 31:20-22). [24] The covenant between God and people is conditional (Lev 26:1-46). [25] The conditional aspects of God's covenant [26] and his promises is emphasized through a sharp contrast between the "if" of obedience (vs. 3) and the "ifs" or "if nots" of disobedience (vss. 14, 15, 18, 21, 23, 27). "And if in spite of this you will not hearken to me, but walk contrary to me, . . . I will devastate the land, . . . And I will scatter you among the nations." (vss. 27, 32-33; cf. Deut 27:9-10; Josh 23:15-16; Judg 2:1-5). Seven centuries later, (722 B.C.), Israel's God brought a final fulfillment of these threatened punishments to the Kingdom of Israel (2 Kgs 17:7-18) and a century and a half thereafter Judah was

plucked up from the Promised Land and scattered in the Neo-Babylonian empire (vss. 19-20).

5. The Conditional Promise of Restoration

The exile of ancient Israel did not mean the end of God's plan for His people. God held out hope of restoration and a return to their land. Isaiah predicted that "the Lord will extend his hand yet a second time to recover the remnant which is left of his people, from Assyria, from Egypt, from Pathros, from Ethiopia, from Elam, from Shinar, from Hamath, and from the coastlands of the sea. . . . and gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth." (Isa 11:11-12). Note that this promise only foresees the recovery of a remnant from Israel [27] in contrast to the recovery at the *first time* of all Israel from Egyptian slavery. [28] The expression "second time" does not refer to a future gathering or the present return of Jews to the state of Israel, because the countries and places enumerated are all territories where the ancient Israelites were taken in the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities. The phrase "four corners of the earth" means the four directions of the compass which corresponds to the territories enumerated in vs. 11. Thus the gathering of the *second time* is the one that took place in Persian times. This prophecy [29] has met its fulfillment in the return of the exiles as recorded in the book of Ezra.

It does not come as a surprise that the prophet Jeremiah, who ministered during the last years of the kingdom of Judah, has a distinct message of the divine restoration of his people. He proclaimed, "They shall dwell in their own land" (Jer 23:8). The Lord himself stated, "I will restore their fortunes" (Jer 32:44) and refers back to the promise made to the patriarchs, "I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your fathers for ever" (Jer 7:7). These promises of return and restoration are based upon the covenant relationship: "I will be your God, and you shall be my people" (Jer 7:23; 11:4; 24:7; 30:22; 31:33; 33:38). This must be seen against their background of failure already outlined in detail by Isaiah (Isa 40:2; 42:24; 50:1; 54:7-8) who also emphasizes the re-establishment of a genuine covenant relationship with God (Isa 55:3-5; 54:9-10; 42:6; 49:8). The constant interrelationship between restoration in the physical sense and restoration of the inner life of the people is also maintained by Jeremiah. Without the inner restoration based on the new covenant "within them" (Jer 31:33) and written on their hearts (31:31-34), there can be no genuine restoration in the physical sense. The new covenant will make a new people.

It has become evident above that for the Exodus generation and their descendants the condition for the reception and possession of the Promised Land

was the fulfillment of the covenant obligations on their part. The failure to live up to the conditions of the covenant caused Israel to fail to experience the complete fulfillment of the promise of the land and ultimately to lose the Promised Land that they occupied. The restoration of the Promised Land is again conditional. The new covenant (Jer 31:31-34) has also conditions: The law must be written on the heart (vs. 33). Repentance is the condition for receiving and remaining in possession of the Promised Land (Jer 25:5; cf. 24:8-10; 35:15; Deut 1:8). "Amend your ways and your doings, and I will let you dwell in this place" (Jer 7:3; cf. 18:11; 22:3-5). The manifold promises of restoration in Jeremiah [30] and other Old Testament prophets are all conditioned by the "ifs" of obedience (Jer 17:24; 18:8; cf. Zech 6:15) and the "if nots" of disobedience (Jer 17:27; 18:10; 22:5).

The biblical teaching regarding God's plan for Israel's reception of the Promised Land and its restoration is consistent. Israel's title to the Promised Land is conditioned through her fidelity to her covenant God. A wholehearted turning of Israel to God and her continued answer through active deeds in response to the divine faithfulness and abundant mercy secures a divine fulfillment of the conditional restoration promises. The Promised Land is God's gift, but cannot be received without the divine Giver. Since no nation in the Middle East today fulfills the conditions that are the prerequisite for the reception of the Promised Land one can hardly conclude that any of the Old Testament promises of restoration are physically fulfilled or in the process of fulfillment in our time. Yet God's plan is not frustrated. The New Testament gives testimony on how He will work out His purposes for all men on the basis of the new covenant with the new people of God (Rom 2:28-29; 4:13-25; Galatians 5, 6; Col 2:11; Romans 9-11, etc.).

[1]. All Scripture quotations are from the Revised Standard Version.

[2]. W. Baumgartner, et al., *Hebräisches und Aramäisches Lexikon zum AT* (Leiden: Brill, 1967), 277.

[3]. The antiquity of this promise is affirmed even by critical scholarship, cf. R. Kilian, *Die vorpriesterlichen Abrahamstraditionen literarkritisch und traditions-geschichtliche untersucht* (Bonn: Hahnstein, 1966), 24-25.

[4]. D. R. Hiller, *Covenant. The History of a Biblical Idea* (Baltimore: J. Hopkins Press, 1969), 102-3; N. Lohfink, *Die Landverheissung als Eid. Eine Studie zu Gn 15* (Stuttgart: Kath. Bibelwerk, 1967); L. A. Snijders, "Genesis 15. The Covenant with Abraham," *OTS* 12 (1958), 261-79.

[5]. God's oath is in keeping with the suzerainty (superior-inferior) treaty, cf. D. J. Wiseman, *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 12 (1958), 124-29; M. G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 124-26.

- [6]. The late dating of Genesis 15:7-18 by L. Perlitt, *Bundestheologie im AT* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchen Verlag, 1969), 85ff., and E. Kutsch, *Verheissung und Gesetz* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1972), 67, is not convincing. See Lohfink, *Landverheissung*, 79-88.
- [7]. See Gen 24:7; Exod 33:1; Num 10:29; 11:12; 14:23; Deut 1:8; 10:11; 11:21; 31:23; 34:4; Josh 1:6; 21:43; Judg 2:1.
- [8]. G. van Rad, *Genesis. A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), 245.
- [9]. D. Kidner, *Genesis* (Chicago: Inter-Varsity Press, 1967), 125.
- [10]. W. F. Albright, "From the Patriarchs to Moses," *Biblical Archaeologist* 36 (1973), 15-16.
- [11]. See G. F. Hasel, "General Principles of Biblical Interpretation," *North American Bible Conference Notebook 1974* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1974), 18.
- [12]. Y. Aharoni, *The Land of the Bible. A Historical Geography* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967), 61-70
- [13]. K. A. Kitchen, "Canaan, Canaanites," *The New Bible Dictionary*, ed. J. D. Douglas 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 183; S. H. Horn, "Canaan," *SDA Bible Dictionary* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1960), 169.
- [14]. A. R. Millard, "The Canaanites," *Peoples of OT Times*, ed. D. J. Wiseman (Oxford: Clarendon, 1973), 33.
- [15]. E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1964), 114; cf. Lohfink, *Landverheissung*, 76. Other passages refer to "the Brook of Egypt" (Num 34:5; Josh 15:4, 47; 1 Kgs 8:65; Isa 27:12) which is normally identified with the great Wadi el-cArish that empties into the Mediterranean about 30 miles south of Raphia.
- [16]. H. G. May, "Hamath, Entrance of," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 2:516-17; Aharoni, *Land of the Bible*, 65-67.
- [17]. See n. 15 above.
- [18]. For details, see Aharoni, *Land of the Bible*, 67-70.
- [19]. P. Diepold, *Israels Land* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1972), 151.
- [20]. C. F. Keil, "Judges," *Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 216.
- [21]. Hillers, *Covenant*, 103, states that the covenant with Abraham "binds only God."
- [22]. E. H. Maly, "Genesis," *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968), 20: ". . . the covenant is unilateral, unconditional on Abram's part."
- [23]. M. Weinfeld, "berith," *Theological Dictionary of the OT* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 2:270-71.
- [24]. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority*, 126.
- [25]. H. Graf Reventlow, *ZAW* 71 (1959), 40, regards Leviticus 26 rightly as a

conditional proclamation of future events.

[26]. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority*, 146, points out that human responsibility is the basic presupposition of the covenant stipulations. D. J. McCarthy, *Old Testament Covenant: A Survey of Current Opinions* (Richmond, VA: J. Knox, 1972), 3, emphasizes that "all covenants or contracts, have their conditions."

[27]. G. F. Hasel, *The Remnant*, 2nd ed. (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1974), 339-48; cf. S. Erlandsson, "Jesaja 11, 10-16 och des historiska bakgrund," *Svensk Exegetisk Årsbok* 36 (1971), 24-44.

[28]. E. J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 1:394.

[29]. See also Isa 43:5-6; 45:13; 49:9-13, 22-26.

[30]. Jer 23:1-8; 24:4-7; 30:8-9, 18-21; 31:27-28; 32:6-23.