

Does the promise still hold? Israel and the land: An essay and responses

by [Gary A. Anderson](#) in the [January 13, 2009](#) issue

What are Christians to make of the promises God made to the Jews? Ever since World War II and the Holocaust, Christians have been anxious about the implications of the strains of anti-Judaism that survived into the 20th century. Time and again, writers have turned to Paul's epistle to the Romans to seek comfort and aid. For what we find in this epistle is a full-throated affirmation of God's promise to the Jews.

The advantage of the Jews, Paul avers, lies in the fact that they "were entrusted with the promises of God." Could their refusal to acknowledge God's Messiah be a sign that those "promises have been annulled? "By no means," Paul declares. "Although everyone is a liar, let God be proved true" (Rom. 3:2, 4). Though they have become enemies for a time, "as regards election, they are [still!] beloved, for the sake of their ancestors; for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (11:28-29).

Inspiring words, these. But what do they really mean? For many Christians, these verses are understood against the background of tolerance for the other. Though tolerance is certainly a laudable goal and everyone should be encouraged to learn about and respect people unlike themselves, Paul's claim about one's attitude toward the Jews is far more specific and penetrating. For Paul, the reason the Jews remain the chosen people is because of a concrete promise that God gave their ancestors. It is that irrevocable promise that gentiles must learn to respect. And what might that promise be? The book of Genesis could not be clearer: Israel is God's chosen nation, and the land of Canaan will be its land for all eternity (Gen. 13:15). The first question that should be in the mind of all Christians, it seems to me, is How are we to understand this promise in our own day?

The question is a perplexing one, and it gets at the heart of a significant difference between the two religions. Christianity thinks of the goal of salvation in terms of resurrection and beatific vision; only a small percentage of very conservative Christians add to this mix the millennial restoration of a kingdom in the land of Israel. Judaism, on the other hand, pins a considerable portion of its eschatological hopes on the return of all Jews to the land of Israel and the restoration of the Temple and its liturgical rites. Even a cursory glance at a Jewish prayer book will show how deeply embedded these hopes are in the Jewish soul.

One answer to this problem of differing eschatologies is to allow the Christian hope to trump the Jewish. But to do this requires one to dismiss the promises that scripture makes about that land. Augustine and other Christian theologians have argued that the Jews lost their title to the land because they crucified our Lord and Savior. In many early Christian works one almost gets the idea that the Roman armies invaded Jerusalem shortly after that tragic event. But this sort of theological judgment is something that the contemporary church has worked hard to overcome.

Fortunately, such supersessionist strategies are not the only ones on the table. There are other ways to think about the land that have better theological roots. For example, the Israeli biblical scholar Uriel Simon distinguishes between two sorts of claims a people can make on a land. The first type pertains to the overwhelming majority of nation states: they make a natural claim, that is, a claim that a certain piece of land belongs to them because that is where they have dwelt for many generations. There they have raised their children, buried their ancestors, and created a distinctive local culture.

The Jews' claim to a land is of a completely different order. Canaan is theirs not by dint of any set of conventional circumstances; it came to them as a gift from God. Israel's claim to the land is of a supernatural order.

As Simon notes, each sort of claim has its own advantages and disadvantages. A natural connection to one's land results from a history of continuous occupation, so that legal title to the land comes to be felt as a kind of natural right. In such a case, the identity between the people and its place is so complete that one does not consider what would become of one's people if it lost its land. "The population feels an obligation to defend its land and its independence," Simon writes, "but in general it does not worry about being uprooted *in toto*. The danger of exile [is not perceived] as a real threat, nor does it impinge on their consciousness." But once such a connection is broken, it is broken forever: when, for example, the Hittites were driven from their land, their identity as a people came to an end.

Israel's supernatural claim to Canaan is not continuous in the same way, since its relationship to the land is marked by rupture. What God has given he can also take away, and on at least two occasions—the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC and AD 70—the existence of Israel as an independent state came to an end. And yet, unlike the Hittites, the people of Israel have perdured. Wherever they are driven they remain unassimilated. "Where are the Hittites?" the well-known Catholic novelist-cum-philosopher Walker Percy once asked. "Why does no one find it remarkable that in most world cities today there are Jews but not one single Hittite even though the Hittites had a great flourishing civilization while the Jews nearby were a weak and obscure people? When one meets a Jew in New York or New Orleans or Paris or Melbourne, it is remarkable that no one considers the event remarkable. What are they doing here? But it is even more remarkable to wonder, if there are Jews here, why are there not Hittites here?" For Percy the only answer was a divine preference for this peculiar people. The Jews are an irreducible sign of a higher, transcendent order.

Israel's claim to its land is to be distinguished from that of other peoples in another important way. The choice of Abraham and the people he would engender was not an end in itself. Rather, through that choice God sought to bring blessing to a troubled world. Through Abraham, the nature of God's relationship to humanity was to be made known. Thus, when God was about to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah for their flagrant wickedness, he decided to bring Abraham into his confidence, and for an important reason. "For I have singled him out that he may instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is just and right in order that the Lord may bring about for Abraham what he has promised him" (Gen. 18:19).

But God's dealing justly with the nations of the world is not something that Abraham learns about only by way of dialogue. His own life and the lives of many of his descendants will be witness to this principle in a far more concrete way. For God has bequeathed this land to Abraham's people on the surprising condition that they patiently wait hundreds of years before they actually take possession of it. "Know well that your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs, and they shall be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years." Why this surprising codicil to the promise? Because the wickedness of the Amorites, who were the current inhabitants of the land, had not yet reached its tipping point. God would not give this land away until its former occupants had relinquished their rights. So Israel's right to the land, though the result of a divine grant, is not without restrictions. And the Torah warns that should Israel violate the rules incumbent upon those who would dwell in that land, it will be thrown out, just as the Amorites were. To be sure, God's promise to Israel is eternal, but this does not mean that Israel's presence in the land will be continuous and without interruption. Only in the messianic age, the Tanakh promises, will Israel's settlement in the land be secure and final.

God's promise to Israel is not to be understood as just a settling of accounts with the Amorites. Through his choice of Abraham, God made known to the world the super abundance of his love and graciousness toward all creation. And the graciousness of God found a fit recipient in the person of Abraham, who responded with

unparalleled obedience. Abraham offered back to God that very part of his own being that he held most dear: his beloved son Isaac.

Even more important for a discussion of the promise of the land is another example of Abraham's generosity. In Genesis 13, just after Abraham has escaped from Egypt and brought great wealth back to the land of Canaan, he finds that his possessions and those of his nephew Lot are too numerous for the land to support. One option that lies well within Abraham's rights is to send Lot back to his home in Mesopotamia. The land, after all, has been deeded by God to Abraham, not to Lot. But rather than do this, Abraham allows Lot to choose whatever portion of land he wishes. Lot immediately responds by choosing for himself the very best portion—a piece of land that scripture compares to Eden. (Of course, this land turns out to be in the territory of Sodom and Gomorrah, but only the reader is aware of this detail. At the time of Abraham's offer, the valley Lot chose was lush and attractive beyond measure, and neither Abraham nor Lot had any inkling of what fate lay before it.) Abraham, the original beneficiary of the divine promise, concedes the very land that seems most conducive to the fulfillment of that promise.

It is precisely at this point in the narrative, when Abraham shows himself willing to give up this choice territory, that God intervenes and rewards Abraham with explicit title to all the land that has been promised: "Raise your eyes and look out from where you are, to the north and south, to the east and to the west, for I give all the land that you see to you and your offspring forever. . . . Up, walk about the land, through its length and its breadth, for I give it to you" (Gen. 13:14-15, 17). Whereas Lot lifts up his own eyes (Gen. 13:10) in order to select the choicest land, it is God who lifts up Abraham's eyes (Gen. 13:14) to bestow upon him a far better portion. Whereas Lot is asked to look to the north and south to determine the land that will be his (Gen. 13:9), Abraham is instructed to cast his glance toward all four points of the compass (Gen. 13:14). The generosity of Abraham does not put the divine promise at risk; on the contrary, it comes to play an important role in the fulfillment of that promise. It is Abraham's good work of generosity that spurs God to promise the land as an eternal patrimony to the chosen line.

Where does this leave us with the Jewish claim to the land of Palestine? Some Christian fundamentalists have insisted that because we live on the cusp of the messianic era, anything Israel does in Palestine must be construed as part of its larger divine mandate. But even if we are witnesses to the beginning of the final messianic age—a possibility that can never be wholly dismissed—we should certainly expect that whatever God does with the Jews during this time will conform to the character of his relationship to this people as it is revealed in the Bible. A unilateral land-grab that takes no moral cognizance of the plight of Israel's neighbors is not consistent with Israel's foundational story.

Still, Christians must also insist that the promises of scripture are indeed inviolable and that Israel's attachment to this land is underwritten by God's providential decree. The miraculous appearance of the Israeli state just after the darkest moment in Jewish history is hard to interpret outside of a theological framework.

Nevertheless, the acknowledgment of Israel's right to some form of sovereignty in Palestine leaves many pressing moral questions open. How is Israel to view the present moral quandary in which it finds itself? What is the relationship of Israeli Jews to the people with whom they dwell? Uriel Simon's distinction between a natural and a supernatural claim to the land provides an important new way of looking at this problem. If we construe Israel's claim to the land as part of a providential right and presume, as Simon does, that though Israel's claim to the land is continuous and eternal, its actual physical possession of it is not, then we are not put into the uncomfortable position of saying that any particular form of the Jewish state is divinely mandated from now until eternity. As Simon so clearly argues, the uniqueness of Israel has been its ability to retain a corporate identity as a people in spite of long periods of exile from its land. Most peoples of the world have disappeared under the results of such pressure, as one can quickly learn from studying the migration of nations in hoary

antiquity. Where are the Hittites?

At the close of his essay, Simon presents a perspective to which I believe the Christian churches could assent:

I believe that we are living in an era in which the divine promises are being enacted, a time in which God is extending assistance to his people, a time in which a portion of our biblical destiny is taking bodily form. This faith ought to instill in us patience, personal and spiritual trust, a readiness to assume great personal sacrifice, and above all this faith should support us in marshalling our energies for a fitting embodiment of this destiny. Along with this, it is incumbent upon us to take every precaution against “false messianism,” from an advancement of the course of human history by dint of sheer human will and the refusal to distinguish between an era in which the ways of this (fallen) world still remain in force and the messianic age wherein the wolf shall lie down with the lamb. The failure to make precisely this distinction will occur when we convince ourselves that what we have has been promised from above and that our return to the land is indeed final. Precisely this sort of false confidence is liable to lead to our spoiling once more—[God] forbid!—the great opportunity that has been given us. On the other hand, our hold on this land will grow stronger the more we remember that it has been given conditionally, that is, on the nature of our deeds. These deeds must include a zealous pursuit of peace.

For Simon, Israel’s providential right to the land is secure. It is the subject of a divine promise. The nature of Israel’s present return was unanticipated by many Jewish thinkers and posed a serious challenge to many thoughtful religious Jews. But then, the same was true of the many horrors visited upon this chosen people in the 20th century. But Israel’s providential right to this land, Simon observes, is not final and complete. The promise of the land will remain conditional until the dawn of the messianic age. Israel’s ability to retain its independence will depend on both its obedience to the commandments and the resolve and power of its military.

The return of the Jews to Israel has also posed a challenge to Christians. Ever since the days of Augustine, Israel’s landlessness was commonly thought to be a punishment for the death of Christ. The events of the 20th century showed us where this type of thinking can lead. Happily, many Christians have moved beyond this position. The question now is whether we can move from an attitude of toleration to bold theological affirmation. It is hard to imagine what more fundamental promise to the people of Israel there is than that of the land. Certainly Paul must have presumed as much when he penned his letter to the Romans a few decades prior to the Roman invasion.

Can we go one step further and say that the return to Zion in our own day is part of God’s providential design? I believe we can. Does asserting this position require one to agree with all of the policies of the modern state? Obviously not. Indeed, by claiming that the land of Israel is part of Israel’s eternal divine patrimony, one can only hope that the modern state will follow the moral ethos that scripture has set forth. But at the same time, one must acknowledge that this state, like every other state, has the responsibility to defend and protect its citizenry. This is all the more true in an environment in which so many of its neighbors are committed to its destruction.

There are plenty of grounds for criticism of the modern state of Israel. But let me add one final word of caution. Christians who focus undue ire on the policies of that state to the neglect of the horrors perpetrated by its Arab neighbors may find themselves unwitting adherents to the legacy of anti-Semitism they so rightfully deplore. And, as Alan Dershowitz has rightly argued, to the degree that mainline denominations urge sanctions against Israel but none against Russia (for its treatment of Georgia, for example) or China (for its relations with Tibet or Taiwan), they reveal an underlying anti-Semitism. Let me make the modest suggestion that our thinking about the modern state of Israel begin with a prayerful consideration of the promises that God has made to the Jewish people. On this point scripture is clear: God loved them first and most.

A longer, somewhat different version of this article appeared as "How to Think About Zionism" in First Things (April 2005).

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