

Does the promise still hold? Israel and the land: A response to Gary Anderson

by [Marlin Jeschke](#) in the [January 13, 2009](#) issue

Gary Anderson does well to remind us of Paul's word that God's promise of the land to Abraham and his descendants has never been revoked. That promise, however, includes the promise to bless the world and to bless it precisely in showing a new way to possess land.

As Walter Brueggemann points out in *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, Abraham does not receive the land in the way that land was usually acquired then—and has been too often since: by violent conquest. And as Norman C. Habel shows in *The Land Is Mine: Six Biblical Land Ideologies*, Abraham occupied the land as a peaceful immigrant, amicably coexisting with previous inhabitants. Even during and after the violent conquest the Hebrew tribes coexisted with prior inhabitants such as the Gibeonites, once even coming to their defense (the battle under Joshua when the sun “stood still”).

As the Jewish scriptures make clear, possession of the land was not unconditional. “Pollution” of the holy land led to exile. And exile led to the emergence of the synagogue, that institution John Howard Yoder calls “the most fundamental sociological innovation in the history of religions”—thanks to which the Jewish community survived for 2,500 years, while Hittites did not, despite the eclipse of an independent Jewish state between Dan and Beersheba. And the church, the direct descendant of the synagogue, has also survived in the past 2,000 years despite the rise and fall of nations and empires.

In his vision of the restoration Ezekiel calls for apportioning land to “the aliens who reside among you,” alongside of land allotted to returning Jews. “They [aliens] shall be to you as citizens of Israel.”

Even more striking than how Abraham and his descendants were to possess the land is the biblical vision of the scope of the land. “All the land that you see I will give to you,” God says to Abraham—enough territory to accommodate as many descendants as the “stars of heaven” or the “dust of the earth,” which calls for much more space than that of Dan to Beer sheba. The same Paul who declares God’s promise to Abraham irrevocable also says in Romans 4:13 that God gave Abraham and his descendants the “kosmos,” reflecting a view quite widespread in Second Temple Judaism (see my *Rethinking Holy Land*).

In the promise to Abraham God intended to guide the human race into a new way to possess land, and not just in one small corner of the world called Holy Land as over against the unholy land of the rest of the world. The promise to Abraham was to be the beginning of a process leading to the sanctification of the whole earth, with all people coming to that new way to possess and steward land. It’s unfortunate that today’s state of Israel, like ancient Israel’s monarchy, has opted to copy worldly nation states in its violent ways of possessing land instead of showing the world the new way to possess land that God intended in the promise to Abraham.

[Gary A. Anderson's essay](#)

[Walter Brueggemann's response](#)

[Donald E. Wagner's response](#)

[Gary Anderson's reply](#)