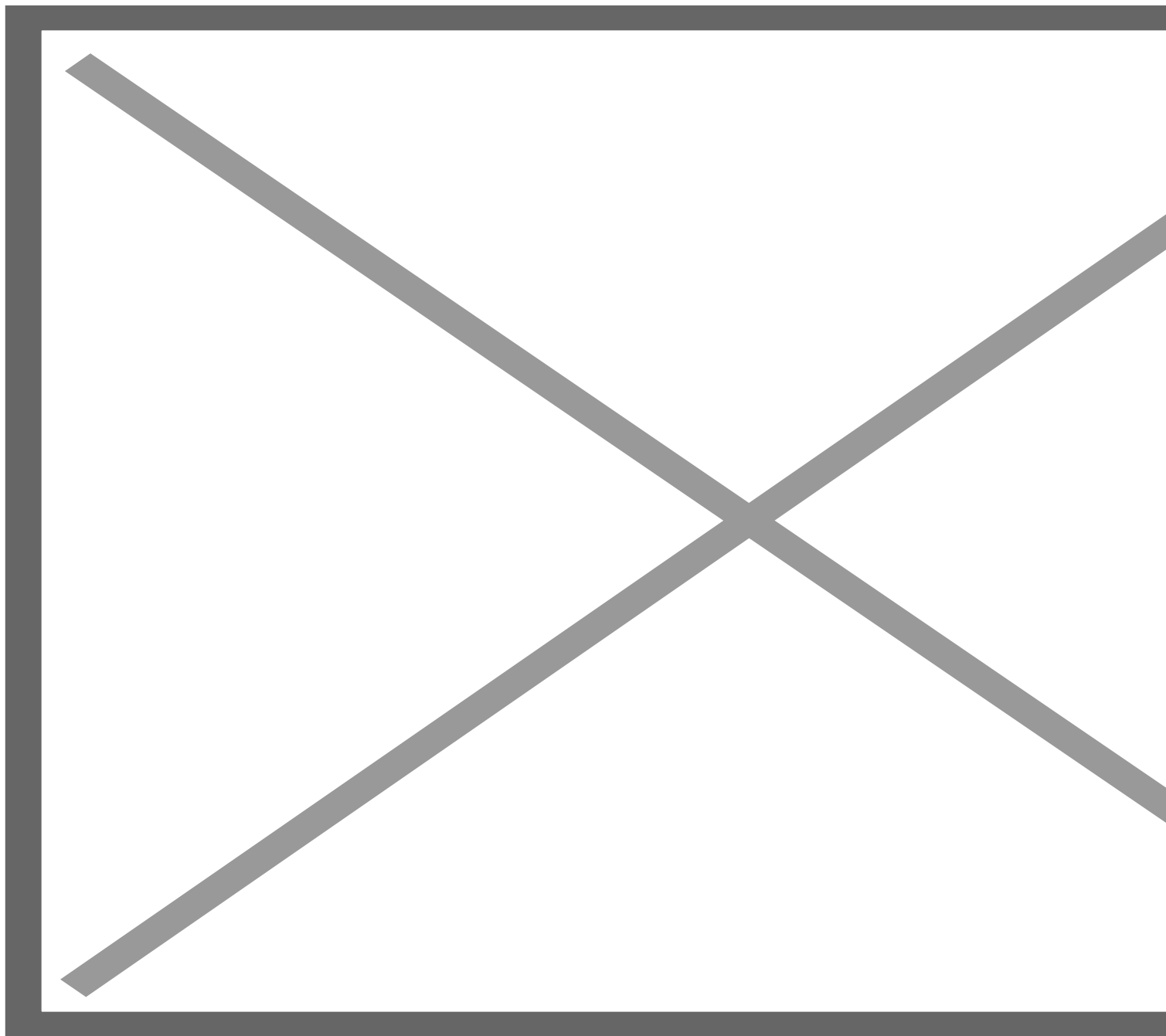


The Hebrew Bible's map(s) of the land of Israel

God promises Israel to the Jews 16 times—and each time, the borders are different.

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In a recent interview with Tucker Carlson, Mike Huckabee, the Trump administration's representative in Israel, was cross-examined as to what Israel expects to gain from its various wars. Carlson asked Huckabee, an ordained Southern Baptist minister, how he interprets Genesis 15:18, in which God promises the descendants of Abraham the lands from the Nile to the Euphrates—an expanse which covers the present state of Israel plus Jordan and parts of Syria, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Egypt. When pressed on whether Israel has the right to all of that land, Huckabee quipped, “It would be fine if they took it all.” The implication seemed to be: *God promised all that territory, and you can't argue with God.* Carlson was flabbergasted. Was Huckabee being serious? Apparently yes.

But Huckabee was way off base. Does he not realize that God, the Jewish God of the Bible at least, can change his mind? Early in Genesis, God even expresses his disappointment in creating humankind (6:6). So is it any surprise that he changes the borders of the land of Israel to suit the changing situation on the ground?

It is probably true that something like the greater Israel to which Huckabee alluded existed in the time David and Solomon, but that was an exception to the rule. Theirs was a maximalist situation even more extreme than the one proposed by the Zionist ideologue Ze'ev Jabotinsky in the early 20th century, with his famous cry for “both sides of the Jordan.”

By contrast, the sages of the Midrash averred that “there are only three places where the nations of the world cannot argue as to Israel's ownership, since they were bought outright: the cave and field of Machpelah, the Temple Mount and the grave of Joseph,” even though Muslims are currently responsible, in large part, for all three sites.

Somewhere between these two extremes lies the land of Israel, but to say its borders are fixed would be to deny the evidence of the Bible itself. According to the late rabbi and professor Jacob Milgrom, there are, throughout the Hebrew Bible, 16 maps of the land that God grants to Israel. Sixteen—none of them exactly the same, and all of them much more modest than the map God gives to Abraham. Milgrom says that he published this fact in the 1970s partly to counter the growing clamor for “Greater Eretz Israel,” a quasi-political trend that had grown in popularity since the Six-Day War in 1967. It was clear to Milgrom that it is impossible to base any clear map of the land today solely on the Bible, since the borders are constantly shifting according to the political conditions at any given time.

One example occurs in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah. Their books describe the trials and tribulations of the returning exiles from Babylon from the 520s BCE to about 100 years later, when Babylon is superseded by the Persian Empire under Cyrus. Cyrus gives the Jews—the first time they are so designated—the right to return and rebuild their temple in Jerusalem. Challenged militarily from the very beginning, the newly returned Jews bring documentation from Cyrus that gives them the legitimate rights to be there and to rebuild the temple and its surroundings. The resistance to their return comes mainly from the people who have been placed there by the Babylonians (or by the Assyrians beforehand) and who now claim that they have at least as many rights as the Jewish returnees. These groups included the Samaritans (*Shomronim* in Hebrew).

Although the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are focused mostly on the internal religious struggles and developments of the Jewish community, there are also many details of the struggle over the legal status of the new settlers and their right to build (see, for example, Ezra 4:6-24; Nehemiah 1:1-2-4; 2:7-9, 19-20; 3:33-38; 4:1-17). What is startling about Huckabee's remarks is that the territory given by Cyrus comprises a relatively small chunk of land around Jerusalem and its hinterland. To the north, the territory reaches no farther than Bet El; to the west, it extends to Ono (today's Kiryat Ono) but not to the coast; the southern border does not go as far as Hebron; and the east touches the northwest edge of the Dead Sea (see Nehemiah 6). By the end of the book of Nehemiah, the southern edge has expanded a little to encompass Bersheva (see 2:20-36).

So much for the promise to Abraham. But then again, how much territory did the returning exiles need? Only some 10 percent of those exiled to Babylon initially returned. Demography may well be a more relevant indicator to the needs of the community, then as well as now.

The contemporary claims to all of Israel are thus stymied by the facts. Historically—even if we go back to biblical times—there are no clear borders to the land. As a consequence, the claim that the land of Israel is a fixed entity is simply not true.

There is in the Midrash a mythical beast that expands or contracts depending on whether it is fed. This, says the Midrash, is like the land of Israel, which expands or contracts according to whether its population grows or shrivels—indicating that the sages were aware of the fact that Israel's territory is forever shifting according to the situation it finds itself in.

This would seem to be the situation of Huckabee: His understanding of the biblical text is dependent on a mythical creature. At most, it could be said that his view is shared by many members of Israel's present government.