WHOSE LAND IS IT ANYWAY?

Series: Israel or Palestine? Thinking Biblically About the Land of Israel

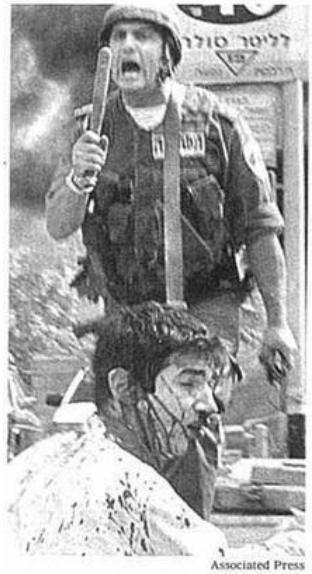
Selected Scriptures

Due to the recent conflict in Israel, which is greater than the conflict has been in a long time, after much prayer and study I am convinced that now is an opportune time to lay aside our study of Romans to focus on this issue of Israel and the land of Israel. My heart and mind has been on the subject of Israel for most of the year, between papers I've written and having a trip planned to leave for Israel in December for a 10-day intensive study trip, postponed due to the war. In preparation for that trip, I've been studying the history and geography of Israel.

Rightly so, a lot of Christians have questions about *how to respond to the conflict in Israel*. Why did God choose Israel? Why that piece of land? Why the conflict over it? Is Israel's re-founding in 1948 legal? Should there be a two-state solution with a Jewish and Palestinian state? Are the college professors right saying that the modern state of Israel is colonialism or imperialism? Who in the world are the Palestinians anyway? Is the Palestinian narrative right in that they are the ancient heirs of the land and there's no evidence the Jews were ever in the land? What should our attitude be towards Israel? What does their presence in the land mean for us?

It's a complex issue with a lot of questions, many of which I hope to answer reasonably and most importantly, biblically, in this series. But people want to know, and I'm glad they do. I have friends and family asking me these things and they've been genuinely thankful for help understanding the issues. And just because I've studied Israel so much this year, my mind is just ripe for it. All I ask is that you pray for me. Pray this will be a truly helpful and edifying study, and that I can communicate well because there's just a lot of information. And a lot of the information couldn't be further from the truth.

For example, the *New York Times* published this photo back in the year 2000. It's a photo of a man with blood dripping down his face and a fiery Israeli policeman standing behind him with a club. The caption reads, "An Israeli policeman and a Palestinian on the Temple Mount," implying that the Israeli policeman beat this Palestinian. It looks like police brutality. However, after they ran the photo, the beaten individual was identified as Tuvia Grossman. Tuvia's father wrote the *New York Times* to inform them that that "Palestinian" was actually his Jewish son from Chicago! The Father of Tuvia wrote, "He and his friend were pulled from their taxicab while traveling in Jerusalem, by a mob of Palestinian Arabs, and were severely beaten and stabbed. This picture could not have been taken on the Temple Mount and certainly because there are no gas stations on the Temple Mount and certainly none with Hebrew lettering, like the one seen behind the Israeli soldier attempting to protect my son from the mob."



Associated Press

An Israeli policeman and a Palestinian on the Temple Mount.

The *New York Times* corrected their statement by stating they were wrong, and that the young man was actually an American student in Israel! They also said it was taken in the Old City of Jerusalem. They failed to mention the man was Jewish and the incident happened in an Arab neighborhood. Only after public outrage did they reprint the photo with a correct caption that he was a young American Jewish student who would have been killed had the Israeli police officer not stood over him and guarded him with his club.

Another significant example some of you folks might remember is Mohammad al-Dura, a 12-year-old boy shot in some crossfire between the Palestinians and the IDF the same year. Though no one could tell in the video who shot the boy, the boy became the icon of the Palestinian movement and the IDF (Israel Defense Forces) blamed for it. I share these because much of what we are going to see in the headlines today is a reflection of those false, supercharged narratives. A headline may read something like "Palestinian shot by IDF at border crossing." It typically won't say, "Palestinians strapped with bomb, refusing to comply, forces IDF to shoot." So if you get all your information from news the news headlines, you'll start to assume their opinion. The form the public opinion. The same hurried, sloppy, or intentionally anti-Semitic media bias is still alive and well and it will continue as reports come out of Israel and the Gaza strip.

If you don't know, the Gaza strip is a little strip of land in southwestern corner of Israel. And you can expect that as the IDF (Israel Defense Forces) ground forces move in, justly defending themselves after the unspeakable massacre on October 7th when the terrorist organization Hamas slaughtered any and every Jewish person they could (from babies, women, and the elderly, as fast as they could, while taking some as hostages), suddenly much of the world will forget about that and spin it to accuse Israel of atrocities and humanitarian crisis. Civilians in Gaza being accidently killed in action in this hornets-nest of a place will be *equated* with the jihadists intentionally, brutally torturing Jewish civilians, like cooking babies in ovens and burning entire families alive.

Israel will be misrepresented and mischaracterized by the international media while terrorists are softly be labeled as "militants" or "freedom fighters," kindly having their war crimes overlooked. In his book *Understanding the Arab-Israeli Conflict* author Michael Rydelnik (which is must-have for understanding this conflict) states that the media has proven and will continue to "prove their moral equivalency in depicting death: It portrays unintentional [pre-warned] civilian deaths in military operations by Israel Defense Forces as equally heinous as the deliberate murder of civilians by Palestinian terrorists."[1]

One example to come out already involves the Al-Ahli hospital bombing in Gaza on October 17th. Headlines read, "Hundreds of people have been killed in an Israeli strike on a hospital in Gaza, according to Palestinian officials." But what really happened was that Hamas launched one of their un-controllable, homemade rockets from Gaza towards Israel right past the hospital. And, as approximately 550 of their cobbled-together rockets have done (as of 10/28), it failed during its boost phase. The rocket ended up landing *near* the hospital in the hospital's parking lot and damaging some cars and some of the surrounding buildings. The buildings themselves were intact. If anyone was harmed by the rocket, it couldn't have been but a few.[2] But Hamas didn't hesitate to blame it on the IDF, exaggerate a death toll, and plead for the world's sympathy—and the media

buys it up. That's the way it is in this conflict and it's awful. Don't get me wrong, Israel is not perfect either, but the news media that forms the public opinion is clearly biased.

But why? Why the rise in antisemitism and anti-Zionism? Let's define those.

Antisemitism is prejudice against or hatred of the Jews. The word **Jew** is derived from the term **Judah**. The term **Hebrew** came from Abraham (the first Jew) being a descendant of **Eber**. The Jews are also are a **Semitic** people. You might say *Shemitic* because they are descendant of **Shem**, the son of Noah.[3] But so are 1/3 of the world's population, including the Arabic line of Abraham's son **Ishmael** (Muslims claim to descend from).[4] But antisemitism is used for hatred of the Jewish people and Abraham was a Shemite (Shem), more narrowly a Hebrew (Eber), and the first Jew (Judah, great grandson).

Zionism is the belief that the Jewish people have a right to an autonomous state in their ancient homeland. So, *anti-Zionism* is basically opposition to the modern state of Israel.[5]

But why the antisemitism and anti-Zionism in the media and around the world? Why is it on the rise? Why is it that Israel can do everything imaginable to mitigate damage and protect civilians in their pursuits of animalistic terrorist and yet Israel is the bad guy? Israel is always on the defensive, always having to put up walls to stop attacks and they retaliate only when attacked. Hamas, however, commits unspeakable, unthinkable atrocities like that on October 7th, takes every effort to target Israeli civilians, fires rockets from civilian neighborhoods in Gaza with no precision, hides behind their own civilians and under hospitals, commits all these war crimes and yet they get overlooked and the stories are spun?

Would it help if Israel just gave back the land? I'm going to ruin the mystery already, but no. Israel has always been ready to make for peace and offer a 2-state solution: A Jewish state and a Palestinian state. Israel has given back *much* of the land they've won in wars they didn't start (which is a legal way to acquire land by the way). They've proven they're not imperialists. They've given the **Sinai** back to Egypt. They offered the **Golan Heights** to Syria in exchange for a full peace agreement. They offered all of Gaza and 97% of the **West Bank** (also known as **Judea Samaria**) to the Palestinians in exchange for a final peace agreement (and so much more). They completely backed out of **Gaza** in 2005 in a peace effort. But the Palestinians refuse. Why? Because it's not about peace. It's about <u>existence in this land</u>. We'll get to it in more detail later but the truth is that the Jews have always had a presence in the land and they acquired it through the pen, legally, and not the sword.[6] When legally won with the sword, in wars they didn't start, they gave it back.

Hamas will die before they have peace. Their charter calls for the complete destruction of Jews and national Israel. They feel the same way about the United States too. Iranian leaders like Ahmadinejad, who backs these terrorist groups in and around Israel like Hamas and Hezbollah, have blatantly expressed their desire to "wipe Israel off the face of the map" and establish a Palestinian state *in place of* Israel.[7] They refuse to exist *alongside or with* Israel. Their goal is to *exist in place of* Israel. Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was right when he said in a speech in 2006, "What is the conflict about?... It is about our <u>existence</u> here facing our enemies.

The truth is that if Israel were to put down its arms there would be no more Israel. If the Arabs were to put down their arms there would be no more war."

That's the truth. But the truth is hard to come by and that's why I want us informed on this issue. If anybody should love and pray for and support and be informed on the Jewish people and the state of Israel and interested in the land of Israel (other than Jews), it's us—Christians. Our Bibles are Jewish, our Lord is Jewish, our hope is rooted in promises to the Jews. We're going to end up in Jerusalem someday. And the Lord will bless those who bless Israel. But as we begin this study, I want to put before us what my purpose is:

Purpose: To think <u>biblically</u> about Israel and the land.

We want to know what the Bible has to say about this subject. So we're going to start in Genesis and work our way through seeing what the Bible says about it, past, present, and future. We're going to develop a biblical filter to sift these headlines and ideas out there through the truth of God's Word, which is what we always do.

But this particular area of study is one that I think is sorely misread. A lot of Christians and churches think they are Israel—that the church has superseded/replaced Israel. That's called **Replacement Theology or Supersessionism** and it's closely linked to Amillennialism and Covenant Theology, the idea that we are the true Israel and the kingdom of God is now. Replacement theology teaches that God's basically done with them other than saving a few here and there; that the covenants He made with them are actually fulfilled spiritually in the Church.

Look, I understand how you get there and why those ideas became dominant for centuries, but I do not believe the Bible teaches Supersessionism and once you go there, you will never be able to put the pieces of the puzzle together. You'll never grasp the Bible's storyline in its full-orbed redemption story or how tremendously glorious God's covenant-keeping nature really is. I mean, it's His incredible faithfulness to this stubborn and stiff-necked people that is going to blow minds for eternity. We need the entire story of Israel to understand God and His wonderous program for humanity and the world.[8]

A lot of churches are neutral on this issue or blatantly aggressive against Israel. Some pastors mock the modern state of Israel. Again, I'm not saying that Israel is perfect or godly or even that they're saved—they're mostly in an unbelieving state—but given all the attempts to exterminate them or blend them in with the rest of the world and yet to have them back in the land with their national identity and ancient language in tow, you'd think that would send a stark warning to replacement theologians that God's not done with Israel and that he keeps covenant.

I know I was tough on him last week too but Martin Luther wrote tracts against the Jews that Hitler used. He slandered them as, "venomous, bitter worms, and disgusting vermin," encouraging the German people to "set fire to Jewish synagogues and schools in honor of our Lord Jesus and in honor of Christendom." He advised Jewish houses and literature be destroyed, their treasure taken, and their every move hindered. That's exactly the opposite of Paul's attitude in Romans 9-11, and just the opposite attitude we ought to have towards Israel. But that same antisemitic spirit is alive and well today just as it was with Pharaoh, Haman, and Hitler. It's a dark, demonic spirit.

But the end of the study, we want to think right so we respond right. To respond to this situation in a God-honoring way. Honestly (no hidden agenda here), I want us to a bastion of support for Israel. A bastion is part of the defensive wall that sticks out/protrudes a little further from the rest of the defensive wall. There might be some churches praying for Israel (praise the Lord), but I want us to stick out a little further than the rest. At least that's the image in my mind; to support Jewish ministry and to stand out a bit further than most in support of Israel. And we're not going to get very far today, but we are going to start looking at the land of Israel, past, present, and future.

I. THE LAND OF ISRAEL IN THE PAST.

Genesis 12:1-3 is where we find the call of **Abraham** as we know. But let's appreciate the context again. This is taking place in 2091 BC when Abraham is 75 years old. According to the biblical record, this is approximately 2,000 years into the earth's history so between creation in Genesis 1 and the call of Abram by God in Genesis 12, two millennia have passed (which is more time than is recorded in the rest of the Old Testament by the way).

But these 2 millennia are characterized by apostasy and rebellion. The human race, since the garden of Eden, has proved itself stubbornly rebellious—so much so that God judged mankind by flooding the earth. But there is a remnant of survivors: Noah and his family. Hopes are high in Genesis 9. The flood is over. Noah and his family are safe. Mankind's mediating rule on earth for God (1:26-28) is reaffirmed and extended (capital punishment for murderers, obviously a problem in the previous age).

But by the end of chapter 9, Noah is drunk and it's not a pretty sight. By the end of chapter 11, the nations are *judged again* for erecting the humanistic Tower of Babel, rejecting God and creating a wicked, one-world government. A global government is fine when Christ rules in righteousness and justice, but it's the worst thing imaginable when wicked men rule. So in sum, Gen. 1-11: God's *universal dealings* with humanity. But what you start to see in Genesis 12 and in the rest of Genesis and the OT is God *individual/choice dealings* with a man named *Abraham* and the *nation of Israel* that comes from him. **Gen 12:1-3** reads,

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go forth from your country, And from your relatives And from your father's house, To the land which I will show you; 2 And I will make you a great nation, And I will bless you, And make your name great; And so you shall be a blessing; 3 And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed."

This is one of the most important texts in the Bible. As we've been talking about in Romans 4, even though God chose to work with one man or one nation, God's promise to him had universal elements to it. In choosing this individual Abraham, God is not rejecting the world that has rejected Him. **He is choosing the primary strategy to put Himself on display in the world and draw the world to Himself.** His descendants, who would become the **nation of Israel** (grandson's name Jacob changed to Israel by God), were to be God's mediators in the world, salt and light in the rebellious world. This would be accomplished by placing them in a perfect land to do that—at **the**

center of the world. Just citing one example, God said in Ezekiel 5:5, *"This is Jerusalem, I have placed her in the center of the nations, with countries round about her."* Right at the center of Europe, Asia, and Africa in the only green strip of land there is that people would travel through. So they have a unique relationship with God in a unique *land* to influence the world for God.

God promised the land to Abraham & his descendants.

But notice, land is part of the original promise (land, seed, and blessing). So Abraham journeys from Ur (near Babylon) to the land of Canaan/Israel, following the fertile crescent, stopping in Haran along the way. After that, he went to Egypt for a bit and upon return from Egypt, it says he and his nephew Lot are so rich in livestock they have to part ways. So somewhere between Bethel (Beit el) and Ai, about 10 miles north of Jerusalem on the high ridge route (the watershed route that runs north and south), Abraham and Lot are looking around. Lot chooses to head east down into the once extremely lush Jordan Valley by Sodom and Gomorrah, which the Bible says used to be like the garden of Eden (now virtually uninhabitable and the lowest elevation on earth by the way after God destroyed it). Lot goes east and Abraham settled westward of him (Hebron). In that moment, God further elaborates on this promise. **Genesis 13:14-18** say,

14 The Lord said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, "Now raise your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward, and eastward and westward; 15 for all the land which you see I will give to you and to your descendants forever. 16 I will make your descendants as plentiful as the dust of the earth, so that if anyone can count the dust of the earth, then your descendants could also be counted. 17 Arise, walk about in the land through its length and width; for I will give it to you." 18 Then Abram moved his tent and came and lived by the oaks of Mamre, which are in Hebron; and there he built an altar to the Lord.

So God says all the land that he can see from up there is going to belong to his descendants. For how long? Verse 15 says **forever**. *"I will give it to you and your descendants forever."* Not for 250 years. Not for 2,000 years. Not until AD 70 or 135. Forever. Everlasting. Forever means forever. It does here and it does in John 3:16. In Genesis 15, God reaffirms that promise. God had Abraham bring him a heifer, a goat, a turtledove and pigeon. Then he cut them in two and laid each half them opposite the other. This is an old way of making a **covenant** with someone. Normally *both* parties walked through the sacrifices as a sign that they would *both* keep the covenant. Those are *bilateral* covenants. But look at what happens here in **Genesis 15:12-21**,

12 Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, terror and great darkness fell upon him. 13 Then God said to Abram, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed for four hundred years. [He's speaking about the nation developing in Egypt] *14 But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve, and afterward they will come out with many possessions. 15 As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you will be buried at a good old age. 16 Then in the fourth generation they will return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete." 17 Now it came about, when the sun had set, that it was very dark, and behold, a smoking oven and a flaming*

torch [clearly representing God's presence] *appeared which passed between these pieces. 18 On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates: 19 the land of the Kenite, the Kenizzite, the Kadmonite, 20 the Hittite, the Perizzite, the Rephaim, 21 the Amorite, the Canaanite, the Girgashite, and the Jebusite."*

God affirms the land promise with an <u>unconditional</u>, <u>unilateral</u> <u>covenant</u>.

So there's a lot going on here but suffice much of it to say that after Israel comes up out of the incubator of Egypt, they will possess the land. And God makes a covenant with Abraham on that. And it's not a bilateral covenant because God alone passed through the pieces—saying it's up to Him alone to keep the promise. Again, as Romans teaches us, the promise isn't secured or applied by Abraham's works but by God's grace. It's going to be by God's grace and God's determination that it is fulfilled. Notice God's "I will" statements in all these passages: I will, I will, I will. It's up to Him to fulfill it. There are no conditions attached to its ultimate fulfillment.[9]

Next week, I hope to explain how disobedience to the Law could bring the loss of the *blessing* of being securely in the land, but not even disobedience could annul their *possession* of it. So they always have the title deed, even if they aren't always in the land. They can lose the privilege of being in it. Later in Israel's history in the time of the Prophets, when Israel is being taken out of the land for their disobedience, the land covenant will be reaffirmed. **Genesis 17:7-8** reaffirms:

"I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you. I will give to you and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojourning, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God."

So over and over this land covenant is reaffirmed as clear as ever. Some call it the **Palestinian Covenant**. When the time comes and we get AD 135 in history, I'll explain more of where the word *Palestine* comes from. Emperor Hadrian apparently came up with it. It's a corruption of the word "Philistine," the old enemies of the Jews, and it was meant to erase any memory of Jews owning the land. Interestingly, it's a term that was incendiary, then grew neutral, but then became incendiary to use again. I refuse to call the land covenant the Palestinian covenant because it's antisemitic at the core and is used rewrite history with a false narrative. The land has been called **Canaan, the Levant, Eretz** (Hebrew; the land of) **Israel**, the **Holy Land**, the **Promised Land**, and **Palestine**.

Notice the boundaries of it: this land is not just from Dan to Beersheba (the purple on the map); it's **from the Euphrates River** (defining the northern border?; the Euphrates extends to the north of Israel) **to the Brook of Egypt** (not the Nile but the Wadi al Arish 25 miles southwest of Gaza). Some make it even bigger than that, but it seems this is what was in mind. In the days of David and Solomon, Israel came close to possessing all of the land from the Euphrates to the brook of Egypt in the days of Solomon (1 Ki. 4:21), ruling over it but some of it was tribute from other kings. It also was very temporary. It wasn't everlasting, so future fulfillment should be expected.



A plain reading of the prophets reveals the final or ultimate fulfillment happens when the nation returns *in unbelief* from all four corners of the earth, is converted *in the land*, and Messiah comes to establish His kingdom. Then, the land is revamped, extended, and redistributed. This is the message of the Prophets (Isa. 11:1-12; 14:1-3; 27:12-13; 43:1-8; 49:8-13; 66:20; Jer. 16:14-16; 23:3-8; 30:1-11; 31:31-40; 32:37-44; Ezek. 20:42; 34:11-16; 39:25-29; Hos. 1:10-11; Joel 3:17-21; Amos 9:11-15; Mic. 4:4-7; Zech. 8:3-8).[10] It's even the message of the post-exilic prophets like Zechariah, which means their return from exile in Babylon and Assyria wasn't the fulfillment of those painfully descriptive restoration prophecies. I've said it before and I'll say it again: if you just take the Bible plainly, without spiritualizing all of those prophecies, somehow trying to make them fit into the church or some eternal spiritual existence, the Bible makes sense, and God's covenant-keeping glory is more fully appreciated.

What do we take away from this so far? For one, God promised the literal land of Israel to Israel forever. And He ratified it with an unconditional, unilateral covenant. Redemption of the world required that. If it was up to Abraham to keep it or anyone else, the world (individuals, nations, creation) would never be redeemed. So alone must keep it in His grace. Next week, we'll look at why God chose the land that He did and pick up the story from there. But let me ask you this: Why is there so much hatred for the Jews? The modern state of Israel so despised? Could it be because God has chosen these people and this land to put Himself on display in the world and to bring blessing to the world through them? And that Satan hates whatever God loves and blesses? How amazing that while God has used and will use Israel to bless us, we in return would curse Israel.

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[1] Michael Rydelnik, *Understanding the Arab-Israeli Conflict: What the Headlines Haven't Told You* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2004, 2007), 51.

[2] Israel Defense Forces, "The truth about the Al-Ahli hospital bomning in Gaza," accessed 11/1/2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nEe8pawDMBo

[3] Eugene H. Merrill, "Israel According to the Torah," in *The People, the Land, and the Future of Israel: Israel and the Jewish People in the Plan of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2014), 29.

[4] Ibid.

[5] For more info: Thomas Ice, *The Case for Zionism: Why Christians Should Support Israel.*

[6] Alan Dershowitz, "Israel's Legal Founding," https://www.prageru.com/video/israels-legal-founding?utm_source=app&utm_medium=share

[7] Rydelnik, *Understanding the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, 64.

[8] Elwood McQuaid, *It Is No Dream* (Belmar, NJ: The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry), 12.

[9] Paul N. Benware, *Understanding End-Times Prophecy* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1995, 2006, 56.

[10] Ibid., 59.