JUST ANOTHER LAND GRAB?

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

Selected Scriptures

One of the popular claims that is laid against the Jewish people's possession of the land of Israel—be it in the 15th century BC with the conquest under Joshua or the 19th–20th century AD Zionist movement—is that it is was another unjust land grab. Some allege it is *colonialism*—acquiring control over a country by occupying it with settlers and exploiting or oppressing the indigenous population. Some claim it is *imperialism*—one country extending their power and influence over another through diplomacy or military force. When it comes to the conquest of Israel under Joshua, many will object, saying, "How could God destroy the Canaanites? I could never serve a God like that. It's imperialism. It's genocide." So was the original conquest of the land or the more recent Zionist movement (with the rebirth of national Israel) just another land and power grab? Colonialism? Imperialism? An apartheid, racist state? We're going to answer those questions today from Scripture, our goal being to think biblically about the land of Israel. By way of review:

Already we have asked, *Whose land is it anyway?*

1) Answer: God promised the land to Abraham (the first Jew) and his descendants forever.
2) God confirmed that promise with a unilateral, unconditional covenant.

Then we asked the question, *Why did God choose THIS land?*

3) Answer: Israel was to be a godly influence on the wicked world.
4) This global influence was possible due to God placing Israel in the most strategic spot on the international highway of the ancient world, thus linking the people with the land.

Last week we answered the question, *If God promised the land to the Jewish people, why do they rarely dwell securely in the land? Why is there never any peace in the Middle East or for Israel?*

5) Reason #1: There is ancient spiritual animosity between Abraham's descendants over the promised land and who is the heir of the promise.
6) Reason #2: The land always belongs to the Jews, but disobedience brings exile from it. Upon entering the Mosaic Covenant, a bilateral and conditional covenant, the Hebrew people understood that keeping that covenant would bring guaranteed blessings but breaking that covenant would bring guaranteed cursing. If they obeyed, they would be established in the land. If they disobeyed, they would be scattered to the ends of the earth.

So the observable and patternable divine program of God for Israel is laid out as such:

a) **Dispersion** (Lev. 26:27-28; 26:33; Dt. 28:64-66)—among the nations and ceaseless rest for their feet as a result of disobedience.
b) **Preservation** (Lev. 26:44; Dt. 30:1). Often they find persecution where they go. Because of that God must preserve them out of His covenant faithfulness. Somehow, often through providential means of rulers, the Jews are allowed to return to the land. That's followed by…

c) **Restoration** (Lev. 26:42; Dt. 30:3). God restores them to the land, gathering them from the nations He has scattered them. That is followed by…
d) **Reconciliation** (Lev. 26:45; Dt. 30:5-6; Jer. 32:37-41). They are fully reconciled with God. God gives them a new heart to joyfully fear Him and obey Him.

And that's where we left off last week in the story line—Deuteronomy 27-28, which took place right before the Israelites entered the land to possess it. Today we focus on the conquest of the land. The land of Canaan-Israel at that time was occupied by a conglomeration of peoples that descended from **Canaan**, the son of Ham, the son of Noah (Gen. 9:20-25; 10:15-20). They settled that area called Canaan, Genesis 10 says, from **Sidon** (modern day Lebanon) to **Gaza** (bordering Egypt) to **Sodom** (south Dead Sea), just to name a few key sites we are familiar with. So basically, that entire area on the east side of the Mediterranean often called the **Levant** ("raised up"). In **Genesis 15:19-21**, God said the land was occupied by *"the Kenite, the Kenizzite, the Kadmonite, 20 the Hittite, the Perizzite, the Rephaim, 21 the Amorite, the Canaanite, the Girgashite, and the Jebusite."* Contrary to popular belief, there were no "Termites" among them. That theory arose due to the ceaseless, yet unamusing dad jokes from pulpits across America.

But even though Canaanites are considered one of the tribes among the peoples in the land, they're also all descendants of Canaan and thus, Canaanites. However, they were not a united Canaanite nation by any means. It's a land that has, besides the Jewish people, been ruled by foreign imperialistic nations or empires like Egypt or Babylon. The Canaanites viewed themselves as independent city-states with their own identity, each ruled by their own king/lord/ruler. They often warred against each other, but they also all gave tribute to a larger empire. This would make the Canaanite kings, vassal kings—kings that owe allegiance to another more powerful king/empire.

In Numbers 13 when the 12 spies came back with a report about the land they said, *"the people who live in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large"* and we know from archaeology today, uncovering their cities, that they weren't lying. These cities were heavily fortified, sometimes triple-walled, with thick, elevated walls—walls you must build siege ramps against for years to take down. The first city taken by Joshua, Jericho, was so advantaged that God Himself had to bring it down. It should have taken years of siegeworks to bring down Jericho, but God brings the walls down in an instant. But if He could bring down the walls of Jericho without anyone's help, well then, they didn't have to worry about conquering the rest of it, did they? They just needed to trust God and get going. And they did in 1406 BC.

- 2091 BC – God calls Abram.
- 1446 BC – The Exodus from Egypt.
- 1406 BC – The Israelites, under Joshua's leadership, begin a 7-year conquest and settlement of the land.

And what a lot of people want to say today is, "Well what about the Canaanites? How could God allow Israel to destroy the Canaanites? How could God be so mean?" This is a frequent objection people bring up. To answer it, we come back again to **Genesis 15:16** to when God promised the land to Abraham's descendants. He said they would be enslaved and oppressed for **four hundred**

years in Egypt but said that afterwards, *"in the fourth generation they will return here* [to the land of Canaan]*, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete"* (Gen. 15:16). You don't want to miss that: **the iniquity of the Amorite** was not yet complete. I can't stress how important this text is when it comes to Israel's conquest of the land and God's purposes in it.

What we know about the **Amorites**, the most powerful tribe among the Canaanites and a term that could be used to refer to the Canaanites in general, is that they were an exceedingly wicked and idolatrous people. And their wickedness and their idolatry (worship of false gods) went hand in hand. Their pantheon of gods, no doubt demonically inspired (1 Cor. 10:20), led them to unthinkably base and abhorrent worship rituals. Even their gods were godless. Their gods were tyrants who venerated personal prosperity, sex, and war. These fertility cults led to sexual promiscuity and perversion, as well as child sacrifice to Molech, social oppression, and violence. This is noted both by Scripture, by extrabiblical texts and archaeology. Merrill F. Unger said, "These Canaanite cults were utterly immoral, decadent, and corrupt, dangerously contaminating and thoroughly justifying the divine command to destroy their devotees."[1]

You should have received in your emails yesterday a link to a video by archaeologist Joel Kramer. In it he covers the 1902 archaeological excavation of a Canaanite high place by R. A. Macalister at **Gezer**, located in the Amorite hill country between Tel Aviv (on the coast) and Jerusalem. He titled his excavation report, "The Iniquity of the Amorite" because on this high place, Macalister uncovered several massive stones which turned out to be sacred pillars and an altar. Around the feet of the pillars, Macalister uncovered the skeletal remains of burned infants deposited in large jars. He also found a pit with a great number of human bones in a confused heap, including a 6- or 7-year-old girl who had been sawed in two and the skulls of two other girls who had been decapitated. This was a high places described in the Bible.

It's also why the Law commanded Israel not to worship the gods of the Canaanites. In **Deuteronomy 12:29-31**, God said, *"When the Lord your God cuts off before you the nations which you are going in to dispossess, and you dispossess them and dwell in their land, beware that you are not ensnared to follow them, after they are destroyed before you, and that you do not inquire after their gods, saying, "How do these nations serve their gods, that I may do likewise?" You shall not behave thus toward the Lord your God, for every abominable act which the Lord hates they have done for their gods: for they even burn their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods."*

After speaking of their child sacrifice, immorality, homosexuality, and even bestiality (Lev. 18:19-23), God says to Israel in **Leviticus 18:24-28**, *"Do not defile yourselves by any of these things; for by all these the nations which I am casting out before you have become defiled. For the land has become defiled, therefore I have brought its punishment upon it, so the land has spewed out its inhabitants. But as for you, you are to keep My statues and My judgments and shall not do any of these abomination, neither the native, nor the alien who sojourns among you (for the men of the land who have been before you have done all these abominations, and the land has become defiled); so that the land will not spew you out, should you defile it, as it has spewed out the nation which has been before you"* (God repeats what He said there in Leviticus 20:22-24). In

Deuteronomy 9:4, God says, *"Do not say in your heart when the Lord your God has driven them out before you, 'Because of my righteousness the Lord has brought me in to possess this land,' but it is because of the wickedness of these nations that the Lord is dispossessing them before you."* So the biblical and extrabiblical evidence is clear that the social and moral condition of the Canaanite cultures were incredibly corrupt. And as one man said, "If we take all these texts seriously as part of God's own explanation for the events that unfold in the book of Joshua, we cannot avoid their implications. The conquest was not human genocide. It was divine judgment."

Purpose #1: The conquest of the land was the <u>just</u> <u>judgment</u> of God.

This was not God being mean. This was God being just. He was judging a morally reprehensible culture. Think about this: how many times have you heard someone say they will believe in or serve God because He's apathetic? He doesn't God do something about the evil people in the world? Well, here is a time and place where He actually does and people are shocked. They turn it around and say, "How could God do that? He's a mean God." It goes to show that no answer is satisfactory for someone who doesn't want to submit to God. They don't want to believe.

So this wasn't a land grab. It wasn't genocide of an innocent, targeted people group. It was divine judgment. As **Genesis 15:16** states, God was keeping tabs on that culture's increasing wickedness and God was ready to judge them when they were ripe for it. God said, "Okay, that's enough." Their judgment was due, and that judgement, as it often does, came through another nation—the nation of Israel in this case. What's been unsettling to me this week is looking around at our own culture and seeing that it's right on the heels of Sodom and Gomorrah with homosexuality and transgenderism, or the Canaanites as we saw up our unborn children for our own personal prosperity. As Americans, we can hardly look down on their culture.

Thank God that He is patient. Look at how long God waited to judge them: **400 years**; **four centuries**. God put up with that child-sacrificing, lewd culture for *400 years*. He was *incredibly* patient, just as He was in the days of Noah before the flood, as He was with Nineveh, as He was with Israel, as He is with us today. He is patient, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9). But the day of wrath is coming, and you want to be ready by placing your faith in Christ and getting right with Him. So judgment is one purpose. Is there another? Yes, and we talked about that when we asked the question, *"Why this land?"*

Purpose #2: The conquest of the land was an intentional <u>evangelization</u> of the world.

By establishing this supernaturally saved and guided Israelite nation at the center of the world, God was seeking to reach the world. The land of Israel is a land bridge on the fertile crescent that people were forced to travel through. When they did, they would come to know the one true God and His Law, the goal being to reveal Himself and save people from judgment. The whole world learns about God through His dealings with national Israel. And one thing we see in His dealings with Israel is that He is no respecter of persons. Later on, God uses the Assyrians and Babylonians

to bring judgment on the Jews when they became entrenched in those same pagan worship rituals. Continuing the timeline, we see:

- 1051-1011 BC – The monarchy (1051-586) begins with **Saul**; his capital is in Gibeah.
- 1011 – 971 BC– The monarchy under **David**. David becomes king of Israel; he conquers **Jebus** (**Jerusalem/City of David**; 2 Sam. 5) and makes it the capital. *Why Jerusalem?* For one, access to water. It has a natural **spring** (**Gihon**) in it and another one (En Rogel) close by. Today you can still walk through a tunnel Hezekiah built to channel that water across the city. Jerusalem is also a **central location on the internal ridge route**. It's also on the border of Bejamin and Judah, **promoting unity** (a place like Hebron in the far south wouldn't be acceptable); it also wasn't associated with any one tribe since it was freshly conquered; and it's located on the southern slope of a hill with **valleys** on the sides (the Kidron, central, and Hinnom valleys). Therefore, it is highly defensible.

This is an important city. This is where God chose to dwell, literally, in His shekinah glory presence. He didn't choose Samaria or Gibeah or Hebron or Shiloh. He ultimately chose Jerusalem. **2 Chronicles 6:6** says, *"But now I have chosen Jerusalem for my Name to be there, and I have chosen David to rule my people Israel."* This city is called the city of God and of the Great King (Ps. 48:1-2). It's where Jesus is going to come back and rule from on His Davidic throne (Zech. 14). There are many eschatological, end-times events centered around this city and many of them involve the nation of Israel who clearly must be back in the land for those events to unfold.

- 971-931 BC – David's son, **Solomon**, rules; Israel flourishes in prosperity and possesses almost all the land promised to them (which tells us the ultimate fulfillment of the promise is yet future in the millennium). The first temple is built on Mt. Moriah in the northern reaches of the city of David or Jebus (where the Dome of the Rock sits today).
- 931 BC – After Solomon's death, his son, **Rehoboam**, initiated a series of repressive measures. And in 922 BC, **Jeroboam** led a successful insurrection that severed the northern 10 tribes, called **Israel**, who made the city of Samaria their capital. This left **Rehoboam** with the southern 2 tribes (Benjamin and Judah; called **Judah**). Israel rejects worship at Jerusalem and Jeroboam institutes **calf worship in Dan** (northern border) **and Bethel** (southern border) to prevent Israelites from worshiping in the temple in Jerusalem.

Both Israel and Judah would eventually play the harlot with the Canaanite gods. They became more and more tolerant of Canaanite worship until it became blatant. They rebuilt the high places and altars of the Canaanites, sacrificing their children, practicing witchcraft and divination, thus provoking the Lord to anger (2 Kings 17; 2 Chron. 33). **2 Kings 16:3** says of King Ahaz in Judah, *"But he walked in the way of the kings of Israel, and <u>even made his son pass through the fire, according to the abominations of the nations whom the Lord had driven out from before the sons of Israel</u>."* **2 Chronicles 33:9** says King Manasseh *"<u>misled Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to do more evil than the nations whom the Lord destroyed before the sons of Israel</u>. The Lord spoke to Manasseh and his people, but they paid no attention. Therefore the Lord brought the commanders of the army of the king of Assyria against them, and they captured Manasseh with hooks, bound him with bronze chains and took him to Babylon. When he was in <u>distress</u>, he*

entreated the Lord his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers. When he prayed to Him, He was moved by his entreaty and heard his supplication, and brought him again to Jerusalem to his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the Lord was God." We find in Manasseh's life a little picture of what God does with the entire nation: warning through the prophets, rejection of the warning (not listening to God's word; cf. Jer. 5:14-15; 6:16-19), resulting in dispersion, distress, preservation, restoration, reconciliation.

Just as God used Israel to judge Canaanites, God uses the **Assyrians** and the **Babylonians** as His tool of judgment on Israel. **Isaiah 10:5** says, "Woe to Assyria, the rod of My anger And the staff in whose hands is My indignation. I send it against a godless nation And commission it against the people of My fury To capture spoils and to seize plunder, And to trample them down like mud in the streets" (see also Isaiah 10:15). In Jeremiah 51:20, God calls Babylon His war-club and weapon of war to shatter nations and destroy kingdoms, but they too will be repaid for their evil (v. 24).

- 722 BC – The northern kingdom of **Israel** is conquered and exiled by the **Assyrian Empire**. They introduced blatant idolatry first and they went first. But Judah did not learn from their error. **Jeremiah 3:8** says, "[Israel's] treacherous sister Judah did not fear; but she went and was a harlot also. Because of the lightness of her harlotry, she polluted the land and committed adultery with stones and trees. Yet in spite of all this her treacherous sister Judah did not return to Me with all her heart, but rather in deception."
- 586 BC – The southern kingdom of **Judah** is conquered and exiled by Nebuchadnezzar and the **Babylonian Empire**; Jerusalem, including Solomon's Temple, is destroyed, marking the end of the first temple period.

It's a sad story but we know that it's not over right? God has a covenant with Israel. He will not make of them a complete destruction (Jer. 5:18). He will preserve them and restore them through providential means. That's what Esther and Nehemiah and Ezra are all about. They return to the land under the leadership Gentile kings and rulers who rule in their favor. We see that in Esther when the genocidal plot against the Jews is turned on its head. We see King Cyrus in Ezra 1, after defeating Babylon, decree that all the Jews can return home legally (We have direct archaeological evidence for that decree (look up the Cyrus Cylinder). The interesting thing is, that's exactly what we've seen in the last century with the Zionist movement. It wasn't a land grab. It wasn't colonialism or imperialism. It was the Jewish people returning to their homeland through legal means of Gentile nations who ruled in their favor due to their plight.

History demonstrates that Jews were the last indigenous people to exercise self-rule in the land. After the exile, the Hasmoneans (the Maccabees) autonomously rule Israel. After them, Israel was ruled for 2,000 years by foreign, imperialistic, often Jew-persecuting, empires: Rome (63 BC-32 AD); Byzantine (325-636 AD); Arabia (636-1099); Crusaders (1099-1291); Mamluk (1291-1516); Ottoman (1516-1917); and Britian (1917-1948). But "Even during the Arabian period," writes Michael Rydelnik, "the government was imperial and not related to an indigenous Arab population. The Arabian Empire always governed the land as outsiders from imperial capitals in Damascus, Baghdad, and Cairo. While many ethnic peoples came and went as did a variety of rulers, the land

remained uniquely tied to the Jewish people."[2] As we'll see as our timeline progresses, Jewish people were always in the land and always longing to return to their desolate home.

After the Ottoman Empire joined the wrong side in WWI, the British took over the land and with Jewish persecution on the rise and Zionist hopes in the conversation (I remind this is before WWII), Britian issued the **Balfour Declaration** in 1917, declaring that the Jews can return home. Their home was actually defined as the whole of historic Palestine, including the Transjordan. And it's not just the Jews that were being favored, the Balfour also protected against the prejudice of civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities—in other words, it was not an apartheid state (By the way, twenty percent of the population in Israel is Arab. Arabs serve in their government and in the highest seats. Arabs have freedom of religion in Israel. Many move there because the living conditions are better.

It's not that way the other way around. Many Jews ended up in Israel because they were driven out of the Arab nations where they had lived for thousands of years). But they are granted all the land by Britian, who rules over the land at the time. Jews start to migrate back. Ultimately, however, the **United Nations General Assembly** voted in 1947 to partition the land into two states: one Jewish and one Arab. The world body at that time recognized the legality of Jewish aspirations. While the Jews conceded land, joyfully accepting the proposal (resolution 181), they declared independence. Immediately, the Arab countries surrounding them went to war, seeking to wipe them off the map.

Yet with every war (like the War of Independence in 1948 or the Six-Day War of 1967), Israel takes more land—which is a legal way to acquire land. However, rarely do they keep it. They often they give it right back to people who want to destroy them… why? To demonstrate their desire for peace and that they aren't colonial or imperialistic. Think about this: If Israel was imperialistic, would they concede the entire Transjordan and more? Would they give back the entire **Sinai Peninsula** to Egypt and offer them **Gaza** as well (to which they wisely declined)? Would they offer the **Golan Heights** to Syria in exchange for peace? No. In fact, they completely **pulled out of Gaza in 2005** so that the Palestinians could continue to build a Palestinian State there. The Jews made the place flourish and handed over their businesses to them, supplying them with water and electricity, yet they have received nonstop rockets in return, and 80% of Gazans they say, support Hamas. Because Israel gives land back, they are in the situation they are in today, rescuing hostages and hunting down terrorists who seek to wipe them off the face of the earth and establish Shariah law.

There's a lot to take away from this and think about. But I just want to bring it back to the gospel this morning. The reality is that we are all Amorites at heart. We all sin and are justly deserving of punishment for our sins. But praise be to the Lord Jesus Christ who extends mercy and grace to us through His work on the cross and our reception of Him as our personal Savior. If you've never receive Christ as Savior, do that today. You must trust in Christ as your Savior if you are to enjoy His kingdom and be spared judgment when He comes. If you have trusted Christ, let's be reminded

that we aren't to take that mercy and grace for granted. He wants our whole-hearted obedience. In view of His mercy, Paul says, to offer our lives as living sacrifices (Rom. 12:1-2).

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[1] Merrill F. Unger, *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1957, 1988), 203.
[2] Michael Rydelnik, *Understanding the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2007), 168.

FALL 2023
Life Group Questions

Series: Israel or Palestine? // November 19, 2023
Why Is There No Peace for Israel? // Selected Scriptures

Introduction

To think through the main ideas in the sermon and prepare for your discussion together, we invite you to look over all the questions on the following pages and write your thoughts down before you meet with your group. However, due to your leader's preference or the natural flow of discussion in your group, it should not be expected to cover every question each week.

Warm Up *(Suggested time: 10-15 min)*

A **new warm up question** just for fun: What are looking forward to in the next month?

Getting Started

Transition into group discussion:

1. Open group discussion with prayer. Here are a few potential prayer items:
    a. For the Spirit of God to lead you in truth.
    b. For the fruit of the Spirit to be cultivated in your lives unto the glory of God.
    c. For grace to hear and apply what God's Word is teaching you.
2. Choose someone to read the passage aloud for the group or read together as each person takes a couple of verses.

Study Questions *(Suggested time: 40 min)*

Question 1:
Have you ever thought of or heard someone say they will believe in or serve God because He's apathetic? Or mean? How was today's sermon on the conquest of Israel helpful in answering those objections? What was new to you?

Question 2:
You've probably heard it said that the God of the Old Testament is a God of wrath and the God of the New Testament is a God of grace. Why is this erroneous thinking? Can you think of any passages that speak of God's wrath in the New Testament (Matt. 11:20-24; 2 Thess. 1:7-10; Rev. 2:20-29; Rev. 19)

Question 4:
How does God's covenant faithfulness apply to your life today?

Question 5:
What part of the sermon was most relevant for you and how can you apply it to your life?

Prayer *(Suggested time: 10-15 min)*

A significant part of coming together and "connecting" in Christian fellowship is being open and honest with our lives. Praying with a group of people may be new or it may be familiar to you. While we encourage everyone to pray out loud, please do not feel obligated to do so.

Take a few moments to share any prayer requests. Consider praying about what God teaching you through His Word and the recent discussion that seems the most applicable. Consider what you notice about your own relationship with Jesus. Would you be willing to share your prayer request with the group?