

The Promised Land: A Biblical-Historical View

Walter C. Kaiser, Jr.,
Dean and Vice-President of Education, Professor of Old Testament and Semitic Languages,
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, Illinois
As published in *Bibliotheca Sacra* Volume 138:552
Dallas Theological Seminary, October, 1981, Page 302

In the Old Testament few issues are as important as that of the promise of the land to the patriarchs and the nation Israel. In fact, ארץ, “land,” is the fourth most frequent substantive in the Hebrew Bible.¹ Were it not for the larger and more comprehensive theme of the total promise² with all its multifaceted provisions, the theme of Israel and her land could well serve as the central idea or the organizing rubric for the entire canon. However, it does hold a dominant place in the divine gifts of blessing to Israel.

Yet there is more to the promise of the land than religious significance and theological meaning, an essential interrelationship exists between the political and empirical reality of the land as a Jewish state and all biblical statements about its spiritual or theological functions. The land of Israel cannot be reduced to a sort of mystical land defined as a new spiritual reality which transcends the old geographic and political designations if one wishes to continue to represent the single truth-intentions³ of the writers of the biblical text. Instead, the Bible is most insistent on the fact that the land was promised to the patriarchs as a gift where their descendants would reside and rule as a nation.

The Land as Promise

The priority of the divine Word and divine oath as the basis for any discussion of the land is of first importance. From the inception of God’s call to Abraham in Ur of the Chaldees, God had marked out a specific geographical destination for him (Gen 12:1). This territorial bequest was immediately reaffirmed and extended to his descendants as soon as Abraham reached Shechem (Gen 12:7).

Thus Alt was certainly wrong in rejecting the land as a part of the original promise. Noth was closer to the mark when he declared that the promise of both the land and the seed was part of the original covenant to the patriarchs.⁴

1. H. H. Schmid, “ארץ,” *Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament*, Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann. eds, (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1971), 1:227–35, esp. 234; and “ארמה,” pp. 58-59, cited by Elmer Martens, “Motivations for the Promise of Israel’s Restoration to the Land in Jeremiah and Ezekiel” (Ph.D. diss, Claremont Graduate School, 1972), p. 2.

2. For a discussion which organizes the total message of the Bible around the promise, see Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978).

3. The hermeneutic claimed here is that which was set forth by E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967). esp. chap. 1. Also see Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., “The Current Crisis in Exegesis and the Apostolic Use of Deuteronomy 25:4 in 1 Corinthians 9:8–10,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 21 (1978): 3-18.

4. See Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology*, pp. 89-91, 58–59.

So solemn was this covenant with its gift of the land⁵ that Genesis 15:7–21 depicted God alone moving between the halves of the sacrificial animals after sunset as “a smoking furnace and a flaming torch” (v. 17 ; all translations are the author’s unless noted otherwise). Thus He obligated Himself and only Himself to fulfill the terms of this oath. Abraham was not asked or required likewise to obligate himself. The total burden for the delivery of the gift of the land fell on the divine Provider but not on the devotion of the patriarch. As if to underscore the permanence of this arrangement, Genesis 17:7, 13, 19 stress that this was to be a **בְּרִית עוֹלָם**, “an everlasting covenant.”

Boundaries of the Land

The borders of this land promised to Abraham were to run “from the River Egypt [**מִנְהַר מִצְרַיִם**] to the Great River, the River Euphrates” [**הַנְּהָר הַגָּדוֹל נְהַר-פָּרָת**] (Gen 15:18). Or in the later words of the oft-repeated pairs of cities, the land included everything “from Dan to Beersheba” (Judg 20:1; 1 Sam 3:20; 2 Sam 3:10; 17:11 ; 24:2, 15 ; 1 Kings 4:25 [Heb 5:5]; and in reverse order, 2 Chron 30:5). These two cities marked the northernmost and southernmost administrative centers rather than sharply defined boundary lines.

Even though a number of evangelical scholars have wrongly judged the southern boundary of the “River Egypt” to be the Nile River,⁶ it is more accurately placed at the Wadi el-’Arish which reaches the Mediterranean Sea at the town of El-’Arish, some ninety miles east of the Suez Canal and almost fifty miles southwest of Gaza (cf. Num 34:2, 5; Ezek 47:14, 19; 48:28).

Amos 6:14 likewise pointed to the same limits for the southern boundary: the “brook of the Arabah” (**נַחַל הָעֲרָבָה**) which flows into the southern tip of the Dead Sea. Other marks on the same southern boundary are the end of the Dead Sea (Num 34:3–5), Mount Halak (Josh 11:17)

5 5. Cf. Genesis 13:15, 17; 24:7 ; 26:3–5 ; 28:13–14 ; 35:12 ; 48:4 ; 50:24 .

6 6. The argument is usually based on the fact that the Hebrew word **נְהָר** is consistently restricted to large rivers. However, the Hebrew is more frequently **נַחַל** (= Arabic wady) instead of the **נְהָר** of Genesis 15:18 which may have been influenced by the second in the text (J. Simons, *The Geographical and Topographical Texts of the Old Testament* [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1959], p. 96, sec. 272). In the Akkadian texts of Sargon II (716 B.C.) it appears as *nahal mušar* (James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 286; also Esarhaddon’s Arza(ni) or Arsa = Arish(?), (ibid., p. 290). See Bruce K. Waltke, “River of Egypt,” *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids; Zondervan Publishing House, 1975), 5:121; and J. Dwight Pentecost, *Prophecy for Today* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1961), p. 65. An interesting case for the Nile is made by H. Bar-Deroma in “The River of Egypt (Nahal Mizraim),” *Palestinian Exploration Quarterly* 92 (1960): 37-56.

the Wilderness of Zin (Num 13:21; 34:3 {sic}), Arabah (Deut 1:7), Negeb (Deut 34:1–3), and “Shihor opposite Egypt” (Josh 13:3–5; 1 Chron 13:5).⁷

The western boundary of the land was “the Sea of the Philistines,” that is, the “Great Sea” (Num 34:6; Josh 1:4; Ezek 47:20; 48:28) or Mediterranean Sea, while the eastern boundary was the eastern shore of the Sea of Kinnereth, the Jordan River, and the Dead Sea (Num 34:7–12).

Only the northern boundary presented a serious problem. The river that bordered off the northernmost reaches of the promised land was called “the great river” which was later glossed, according to some, to read “the River Euphrates” in Genesis 15:18; Deuteronomy 1:7; and Joshua 1:4. In Exodus 23:31 it is simply “the river.”

But is the Euphrates River to be equated with the Great River? Could it not be that these are the two extremities of the northern boundary? This suggestion proves to have some weight in that the other topographical notices given along with these two river names would appear to be more ideally located in the valley which currently serves as the boundary between Lebanon and Syria. The river running through this valley is called in modern Arabic Nahr el-Kebir, “the great river.”

One of the most difficult topographical features to isolate is the “plain of Labwah [or ‘toward, in the coming to’) Hamath” (**רְהַב לְבָא חַמָּת**) (Num 13:21), or just simply Labwah Hamath (Num 34:8; Josh 13:3–5; 1 Kings 8:65; 2 Kings 14:25; 1 Chron 13:5; Amos 6:14; Ezek 47:15; 48:1–28). Mazar (Maisler) has identified “Labwah Hamath” or “toward Hamath” as the modern city of Labwah in Lebanon. This city, in a forest just to the south of Kadesh and northeast of Baalbek, was of sufficient stature to be mentioned in Amenhotep II’s stele, as Rameses II’s favorite hunting grounds⁸ and in Tiglath-pileser III’s text along with Hamath. Numbers 13:21 seems to point to the same “plain” (**רְהַב**) a district further defined by 2 Samuel 10:6, 8 and Judges 18:28.

7. Simons argues that Shihor is not a branch of the Nile, the old Pelusiac or easternmost branch of the Nile—which is never a **נְהַל** according to K. A. Kitchen (“Egypt, Brook of,” *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975] 2:224–25), but is the Wadi el-’Arish (Simons, *Geographical and Topographical Texts*, p. 104).

8. Benjamin Mazar, “Canaan and the Canaanites,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 102 (1946): 9. Cf. Simons, *Geographical and Topographical Texts*, pp. 99–102; George W. Buchanan, *The Consequences of the Covenant* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1970), pp. 91–109; Yohanan Aharoni, *The Land of the Bible*, tr. Anson F. Rainey (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967), pp. 65–67; and Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Biblical Account of the Conquest of Palestine* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1953), pp. 48–56. Is the **עַד-לְבָרָא מְצָרִים** of 2 Chronicles 26:8 of sufficient weight to offset this interpretation, or is it merely an imitation of the older **עַד-לְבָרָא חַמָּת** as Simons argues (*Geographical and Topographical Texts*, p. 101)?

Added to this site are Mount Hor (which may be the same as Mount Akkar), just south of the “great river” in Lebanon; and the towns of Zedad, Ziphron, Hazer Aimon (all referred to in Num 34:3–9; cf. Ezek 47:15–19; 48:1–2, 28), and Riblah (Ezek 6:14). All these towns may be bearers of names similar to some Arabic village names today, for example: Riblah, Sadad, Qousseir (= Hazer) or Qaryatein (Hazer Spring).⁹

While the precise details on the northern border remain extremely tentative, the evidence favors some line far to the north of Dan which would include old Canaanite settlements such as Sidon (Gen 10:15) and indeed the whole Phoenician coastal section from Sidon to the Philistine Gaza (Gen 10:19).

Meanwhile, the settlement of Transjordan by the two and one-half tribes seems to be clearly outside that territory originally promised to Israel. Joshua 22:24–25 clearly implies that Gilead was outside the borders of Canaan and the portion allotted by promise. The same implication is sustained in Lot’s removal to Transjordan’s Sodom (Gen 13:12) and in the instructions Moses gave to Reuben and Gad: “We will cross over...into the land of Canaan, and the possession of our inheritance shall remain with us across the Jordan” (Num 32:32, NASB). Even when three of the six cities of refuge were assigned to Transjordan, they were distinguished from the three that were “in the land of Canaan” (Num 35:14). Thus the most that could be said for Israel’s occupation of these lands on the eastern bank of the Jordan is that it was a temporary occupation but that they did not belong to the land of promise. Likewise the Negeb in the south was also outside the parameters of the promise.

The Land as the Gift of God

Leviticus 25:23, in a context dealing with the Year of Jubilee, declares that the owner of the land is none other than the Lord. Indeed the God of Israel is the Giver of whatever the land yields (Deut 6:10–11). Thus one of the central theological affirmations about the land is that it is the gift of God to Israel. Eighteen times the Book of Deuteronomy refers to the promise of the land made with the patriarchs, and all but three of these eighteen references emphasize the fact that He likewise “gave” it to them.¹⁰

This land was “a good land” (Deut 1:25, 35; 3:23 ; 4:21–22 ; 6:18 ; 8:7, 10 ; 9:6 ; 11:17), for it was filled with brooks, springs, wheat, barley, grapes, vines, figs, pomegranates, olives, honey, iron, and copper.

Yet what God gave He then termed Israel’s “inheritance” (נַחֲלָה). It was “the good land which the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance” (Deut 4:21; cf. 4:38; 12:9; 15:4; 19:10; 20:16;

9. See Buchanan, *The Consequences of the Covenant*, pp. 99-101.

10. This point is made by Patrick D. Miller, Jr., “The Gift of God: The Deuteronomic Theology of the Land,” *Interpretation* 23 (1969): 454. The references he gives are Deuteronomy 1:8, 35; 6:10, 18, 23 ; 7:13 ; 8:1 ; 9:5 ; 10:11 ; 11:9, 21 ; 19:8 ; 26:3, 15 ; 28:11 ; 30:20 ; 31:7 ; 34:4 .

21:23; 24:4; 25:19; 26:1). Thus the Owner of all lands (Ps 24:1) allotted to Israel the land of Canaan as their special “inheritance.”

Whereas the land had been granted to the patriarchs by virtue of the divine Word and oath, it was still theirs in theory and not in actuality. For over half a millennium it was only the land of their sojourning; they did not as yet possess it. Then under Joshua’s conquest the ancient promise was to be made a reality.

Since the land was a “gift,” as Deuteronomy affirmed in some twenty-five references (Deut 1:20, 25; 2:29 ; 3:20 ; 4:40 ; 5:16 ; *et passim*), Israel had but to “possess” (יָרַשׁ) it (Deut 3:19; 5:31 ; 12:1 ; 15:4 ; 19:2, 14 ; 25:19). This does not mean that the idea of taking the land by force or conquest was contradictory to the idea of its bestowal as a gift.¹¹ As Miller correctly reconciled the situation, God’s overthrow of the enemy would be the way in which He would finally allow Israel to take possession of the land.¹² The two notions come together in the expression, “The land which Yahweh gives you to possess.”

If it be objected, as it surely has, that such action on God’s part is pure chauvinism and unfair partiality, it should be remembered that Deuteronomy had already spoken of the same divine replacement of former inhabitants in Transjordan. The Emim, Horites, and Zamzummim had been divinely dispossessed and destroyed (Deut 2:9, 12, 21) and their lands had been sovereignly given to Moab, Edom, and Ammon. The comparison of their situation with Israel’s had not been missed by the writer (2:12). In fact Amos 9:7 reviews several other exoduses Yahweh had conducted in the past: the Philistines from Crete and the Syrians from Kir of Mesopotamia, not to mention the Ethiopians.

Accordingly, as the conquest came to an end, what the patriarchs had enjoyed solely in the form of promissory words except for a burial plot or two was now to be totally possessed.¹³ Yet this introduced another enigma, namely, the gap between the gift of the whole land and the reality of Israel’s partial conquest and control of the land. On the one hand Yahweh promised to drive out the inhabitants of Canaan “little by little” (בְּעֵט בְּעֵט) (Exod 23:30–33), and Joshua made war “a long time” (יָמִים רַבִּים) (Josh 11:18). On the other hand the Canaanites were destroyed “quickly” (בְּהֵרָא) (Deut 7:22; 9:3).¹⁴ Furthermore not only is the speed with which the conquest

11. Von Waldow felt these two ideas were “self-contradictory” (Hans E. von Waldow, “Israel and Her Land: Some Theological Considerations,” *A Light unto My Path*, eds. Howard N. Bream et al. [Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1974], p. 502).

12. Miller, “The Gift of God,” p. 455.

13. For further development of this thought see Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology*, pp. 124-36.

14. For a full statement of this problem, see G. Ernest Wright, “The Literary and Historical Problem of Joshua 10 and Judges 1,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 5 (1946): 105-14. For a partial evangelical response, see Kenneth Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* (Downers

was completed an issue; but also the extent of the conquest is a problem (cf. Josh 12:10–23 with 15:63 ; 17:12 ; Judg 1:21–22, 29). But the contrasting statements on the speed of the conquest are relative only to the magnitude of the work that was to be done. Where the conquest is presented as *fait accompli*, it is so from the standpoint of the territory having been generally secured from the theocratic perspective (even though there were many pockets of resistance that needed to be flushed out and some sites that needed to be recaptured several times since the fortunes of warfare tended to seesaw back and forth as positions frequently changed hands).

Nevertheless the inheritance remained as a gift even when the actual possession of the land lagged far behind the promise. An identical conundrum can be found by comparing the various provisions for “rest” (נָחָה, Exod 33:14; מְנוּחָה, Deut 12:9) in the “place” that the Lord had chosen to “plant” His people. Whereas Israel had not yet come to the “resting place” and to the inheritance of the land (Deut 12:9), by the time Joshua had completed his administration “The LORD (had given] them rest on every side, according to all that He had sworn to their fathers.... Not one of the good promises which the LORD had made to the house of Israel failed; all came to pass” (Josh 21:44–45, NASB).¹⁵

Why then, it might be asked, was David still expecting this rest as a future hope (2 Sam 7:10–11)? And why was Solomon, that “man of rest,” expecting it (1 Kings 8:56; 1 Chron 22:9)? The solution to this matter is that even the emphasis of Joshua in 21:44–45 was on the *promised word* which had not failed Israel, nor would it. But whether any *given* generation has remained in the land has depended on whether it has set a proper value on God’s promised inheritance.

Such conditionality did not “pave the way for a declension from grace into law,” as von Rad suggested¹⁶; neither does the conditional aspect of any single generation’s participation in the blessings offered in the Davidic covenant contradict the eternity of their promises. The “if” notices in this covenant (1 Kings 2:4; 8:25 ; 9:4–5 ; Pss 89:29–32 ; 132:12 ; cf. 2 Sam 7:14–15) referred only to any future generation’s participation in the benefits of the covenant, but they did not affect the transmission or the certainty of God’s eternal oath.¹⁷ The ownership of the land (as a gift from God) is certain and eternal, but the occupation of it by any given generation is conditioned on obedience.

Therefore neither the days of Joshua nor those of David could be used as a kind of blank check for any subsequent generation to rest on their fathers’ laurels. Indeed, the word of promise could

Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1964).

15. See Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., “The Promise Theme and the Theology of Rest,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 130 (April-June 1973): 135-50.

16. Gerhard von Rad, “The Promised Land and Yahweh’s Land in the Hexateuch,” in *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays*, tr. E. W. T. Dicken (New York: McGraw-Hill Co., 1966), p. 91. Also see von Rad, “There Remains Still a Rest for the People of God: An Investigation of a Biblical Conception,” in *The Problem of the Hexateuch*, pp. 94-102.

17. See Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology*, pp. 61-66, 92–94.

also be theirs, if they would enter not only into the material resting place, but if they too would appropriate that rest by faith as did Caleb and Joshua (Ps 95:7–11; cf. Rom 9–11).

Loss of the Land

The history and theology of the land divides right at this point. In the succinct vocabulary of Brueggemann,¹⁸ the Jordan is “the juncture between two histories.” In the one “history is one of *landlessness on the way to the land*” and in the other it is “*landed Israel in the process of losing the land*.” Thus the sine qua non for continued enjoyment of life in the land is obedience that springs from a genuine love and fear of God. Failure to obey could lead to war, calamity, loss of the land, or death itself (Deut 4:26).

Many of the laws were tied directly to the land and Israel’s existence on it, as indicated by the motive clauses or introductory words found in many of them.¹⁹ In fact when evil was left unchecked and was compounded, it caused the land to be defiled and guilty before God (Deut 21:23; 24:4). This point could not have been made more forcefully than it is in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28. Naturally no nation or individual has the right to interpret any single or isolated reverse or major calamity in life as an evidence of divine love which is seeking the normalization of relationships between God and man. Yet Israel’s prophets were bold to declare with the aid of divine revelation that certain events, especially those in related series, were indeed from the hand of God (e.g., Amos 4:6–12 and Hag 1:4–7).

The most painful of all the tragedies would be the loss of the land (Lev 26:34–39). But such a separation could never be a permanent situation, how could God deny Himself and fail to fulfill His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Lev 26:42)? As surely as the judgments might “overtake” (Deut 28:15, 43; cf. Zech 1:6) future generations, just as surely would every promised blessing likewise “overtake” (Deut 28:2) them the moment “repentance” (שוב) began (Deut 30:2, 6, 8, 10; cf. Zech 1:6).²⁰ Forsaking the covenant the Lord made with the fathers would lead to an uprooted existence (Deut 30:14–18) until God once more restored the fortunes of Israel.

The Prophets and the Promise of a Return

The “headwaters” of the “return” promises, as Martens states in one of the first studies of land theology in the prophets,²¹ are in Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Both of these men had experienced

18. Walter Brueggemann, *The Land* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), pp. 71-72. See also the mammoth tome by W. D. Davis, *The Gospel and the Land* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1974), esp. pp. 36-48.

19. This fine point is made by Miller, “The Gift of God,” pp. 459-60. The instances from Deuteronomy he lists are 15:1ff; 16:18–20; 17:14ff; 18:9ff; 19:1ff; 19:14; 21:1ff; 21:22ff; 24:1–4; 25:13–16.

20. Cf. Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology*, pp. 137-39, 198, 223.

21. Martens, “Motivations for the Promise of Israel’s Restoration,” p. 12. See also the earlier study of Hans-Reudi Weber, “The Promise of the Land: Biblical Interpretation and the Present Situation in the Middle East,” *Study Encounter* 7 (1971): 7-10 (= “La Promesse de la Terre,” *Foi*

firsthand the loss of land; yet together they contain twenty-five explicit statements about return to the land²² and five texts with indirect announcements of return.²³

Jeremiah's characteristic formula for the restoration of Israel to the land is "restore the fortunes (or captivity)" (שְׁבַתִּי אֶת־שְׁבוֹתָ) (שְׁבַתִּי אֶת־שְׁבוֹתָ). Twelve of its twenty-six occurrences in the Old Testament are found in Jeremiah (e.g., 29:14 ; 30:3 ; 32:44). Ezekiel on the other hand usually casts his message in a three-part formula (e.g., Ezek 11:17; 20:41–42 ; 36:24 ; 37:21): (a) "I will bring (*Hiphil* of שָׁבַת) you from the people"; (b) "I will gather (*Piel* of קָבַץ) you from the lands"; (c) "I will bring (*Hiphil* of בָּרָא) you into the land of Israel."²⁴

In one of the most striking passages in the prophets, Yahweh pledges that His promise to restore Israel's fortunes (Jer 33:26) will be as dependable and as certain as His covenant with day and night (33:20, 25).

While the sheer multiplicity of texts from almost every one of the prophets is staggering, a few evangelicals insist that this pledge to restore Israel to her land was fulfilled when Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah led their respective returns from the Babylonian Exile. But if the postexilic returns to the land fulfilled this promised restoration predicted by the prophets, why then did Zechariah continue to announce a still future return (10:8–12) in words that were peppered with the phrases and formulas of such prophecies as Isaiah 11:11 and Jeremiah 50:19?

Such a return of the nation Israel to the land could come only from a literal worldwide assemblage of Jews from "the four corners of the earth" (Isa 11:12). The God who promised to bring spiritual and immaterial blessings will also fulfill the material, secular, and political blessings in order to demonstrate that He is indeed Lord of the whole earth and all that is in it.

The question as to whether the return follows a national spiritual awakening and turning to the Lord or vice versa is difficult. Sometimes the prophets seem to favor the first, as in Deuteronomy 30, and sometimes it appears that the return precedes any general repentance, as in Ezekiel 36:1–37:14 and perhaps in Isaiah 11. But there can be no question about a future return in any of the prophets.

et Vie, 71 [1972]: 19-46).

22. Martens listed these explicit ones as Jeremiah 3:11–20; 12:14–17 ; 16:10–18 ; 23:1–8 ; 24 ; 28:1–4 ; 29:1–14 ; 30:1–3 ; 30:10–11 ; 31:2–14 ; 31:15–20 ; 32:1–44 ; 42:1–22 ; 50:17–20 ; Ezekiel 11:14–21; 20:39–44 ; 34:1–16 ; 35:1–36:15 ; 36:16–36 ; 37:1–14 ; 37:15–28 ; 39:21–29 .

23. The indirect ones were Jeremiah 30:17b–22; 31:23–25 ; 33:1–18 ; Ezekiel 28:20–26; 34:17–31 (Martens, "Motivations for the Promise of Israel's Restoration," pp. 172-96).

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 164-72.

The New Testament and the Promise of the Land

For Paul, no one of the previous promises has changed—not even the promise of the land. Since the Old Testament has an authority equal to that of the New Testament, the permanency and directness of the promise of the land to Israel cannot be contravened by anything allegedly taught in the New Testament. Tal is wide of the mark when he summarizes the view that the Old Testament can be set aside now that the New Testament era has dawned.²⁵ He holds that all geopolitical rights promised in the old covenant have been cancelled and that the best that Israel can hope for now is to be part of the new people of God, the church, but without nationality, land, or statehood. But such a view does not square with either the Old covenant or the New covenant.

The most significant passage on this subject in the New Testament is Romans 9–11, especially 11:11–36. For Paul, Israel’s restoration to the favor and blessing of God must come in “full number” or as the RSV puts it, “full inclusion” (πλήρωμα, Rom 11:12; cf. πλήρωμα τῶν ἐθνῶν in 11:25). Thus Israel is and remains God’s link to her own future as well as the link to the future of the nations. For if her temporary loss of land and failures have fallen out to the spiritual advantage of the world and their reconciliation to God, her acceptance will signal her “life from the dead” (11:15).

“And so all Israel will be saved” (Rom 11:26) in accordance with the predictions of Isaiah 27:9 and 59:20–21. The “and so” (καὶ οὕτως) probably points back to verse 25 and the “mystery” of the temporary failure of Israel until the full number of the Gentiles comes in (cf. Luke 21:24). Then, in that future moment, “all Israel will be saved” (πᾶς Ἰσραὴλ σωθήσεται). This is not a matter of individual salvation nor a matter of converting to a Gentile brand of Christendom, but it is a matter of God’s activity in history when the nation shall once again, as in the days of blessing in the past, experience the blessing and joy of God spiritually, materially, geographically, and politically.

The main lines of Paul’s argument in Romans 9–11 are clear and in complete agreement with the promise of the land to the nation of Israel in the Old Testament. Therefore one ought not detract from or minimize the full force of this blunt witness to God’s everlasting work on behalf of Israel. For herein lies one of the greatest philosophies of history ever produced: Israel is God’s watermark on secular history that simultaneously demonstrates that He can complete in time and space what He promised to do and that He, the Owner and Ruler of all nations, geography, and magistrates, will deal severely with those nations that mock, deride, parcel up, and attack Israel (e.g., Joel 3:1–5). Those that attempt to do so either in the name of the church or the name of political and economic expediency will answer to the God of Israel.

25. Uriel Tal, “Jewish Self-Understanding and the Land and State of Israel,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 26 (1970): 353-54.

Yes, Israel is the “navel” of the earth (Ezek 38:12; cf. 5:5)²⁶ in more ways than one. The mark of God’s new measure of grace, not only to Israel as a nation but also to all the nations and Gentiles at large, will be Israel’s return to the land and enjoyment of it in the millennium.

26. But see the brilliant essay by Shermaryahu Talmon, “The ‘Navel of the Earth’ and the Comparative Method.” in *Scripture in History and Theology: Essays in Honor of J. Coert Rylaarsdam*, eds. Arthur L. Merrill and Thomas W. Overholt (Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1977), pp. 243-68. He concluded that **טִבּוּר הָאָרֶץ** does not mean a mountain peak that serves as the center of all the surrounding landscape, but that it is a plateau, a level plain nested on a mountain. The Septuagint *ὀμφαλος* “navel,” is unwarranted when judged by biblical and contextual considerations.

This article first appeared in *Bibliotheca Sacra* Volume 138:552.

Dallas Theological Seminary, October, 1981; Page 302

And is used at www.thepromise.typepad.com with permission.

No part of this article may be copied or transmitted in any form without the prior permission of Bibliotheca Sacra.